FOREIGN MILITARY STUDIES

MS No. B-839

# A GERMAN PARACHUTE REGIMENT IN NORMANDY

1954

HISTORICAL DIVISION
HEADQUARTERS US ARMY, EUROPE

MS # B-839

# A GERMAN PARACHUTE REGIMENT IN NORMANDY

## Operations of the 6th Fallschirm Regiment, 6 June-15 August 1944

By

Friedrich Freiherr von der Heydte, Oberstleutnant, a.D.

With Comments By Generalleutnant Max Pemsel, Former Chief of Staff,
German Seventh Army

HISTORICAL DIVISION
HEADQUARTERS
UNITED STATES ARMY, EUROPE
1954

# P R E F A C E

This account of the fighting around Carentan, Periers, and St. Denis-le-Gast by the commanding officer of a German parachute regiment was written early in 1948 as a part of the Allendorf phase of the Foreign Military Studies project of the U.S. Army in Europe. At the time of writing the German contributors had little or no access to official records, but they were able to reinforce their memories by comparing notes with other war prisoners at Allendorf. Many of the German contributions, which constitute the B-series manuscripts of the Foreign Military Studies Branch and are designed to supply German memoirs in lieu of missing documents, have been liberally used by U.S. Army historians preparing the official histories of World War II. This particular manuscript, B-839, has been cited by Gordon A. Harrison in Cross-Channel Attack. However, the U.S. Army histories can give little space to the German accounts of fighting, although the German version of what occurred is often of keen interest to Americans who fought in Normandy. Because of this and because Lieutenant Colonel von der Heydte's interesting relation may contain some thoughts valuable to troop commanders, this manuscript has been translated and prepared for limited distribution to units in USAREUR. There has been no attempt to check the author's statements against official records or accounts, either American or German. It is offered for what it may be worth, just as prepared by the author. Comments by Generalleutnant Max Pemsel, former chief of staff of the German Seventh Army, appear as signed footnotes.

W. S. NYE
Colonel, Artillery
Chief, Historical Division

Karlsruhe, Germany
July 1, 1954

# THE AUTHOR

Lieutenant Colonel von der Heydte (center).

Friedrich-August Freiherr von der Heydte, born 30 March 1907, entered the German Army in 1935. In 1940, as a captain, he was transferred from the Army to the Luftwaffe parachute service. During World War II he served in North Africa, Italy, Russia, and France. In 1944 he was promoted to lieutenant colonel and assigned to the command of the 6th Parachute Regiment, 2d Parachute Division. He is now a professor of political science on the faculty of the University of Wuerzburg.

C O N T E N T S


| | | Page |
|---|---|---|
| PREFACE | | ii |
| THE AUTHOR | | iii |
| CHAPTER 1. | INVASION OF THE COTENTIN PENINSULA | 1 |
| I. | Organization of the 6th Fallschirm Regiment | 1 |
| II. | Situation on the Cotentin Peninsula Prior to 6 June 1944 Invasion | 4 |
| III. | The Allied Attack | 8 |
| IV. | The Battle for Carentan | 15 |
| CHAPTER 2. | THE WITHDRAWAL | 25 |
| I. | Fighting in the Meautis Area | 25 |
| II. | Fighting in the Seves Sector | 30 |
| III. | Withdrawal from the Periers Area | 35 |
| IV. | The Coutances Pocket | 36 |
| V. | The Villedieu Pocket | 42 |
| VI. | Withdrawal from Normandy | 45 |
| GENERAL REFERENCE MAP | | Rear Pocket |

# CHAPTER 1

## INVASION OF THE COTENTIN PENINSULA

### I. ORGANIZATION OF THE 6th FALLSCHIRM REGIMENT

At the end of September or the beginning of October 1943, Hitler, influenced by the fact that elements of the 1st Battalion of the 7th Fallschirm (FS) Regiment[1] had effected Mussolini's liberation, approved a plan proposed to him by Goering which called for a large-scale increase in the number of parachute troops. Until the fall of 1943 German parachute forces comprised one corps (the XI Air Corps) consisting of two divisions. Goering's plan called for increasing the parachute forces by the end of 1944 to the strength of two armies totaling 100,000 men, to be placed on a par with the Waffen SS in regard to personnel replacements, weapons, equipment, and training. Goering probably had in mind the possibility of a future struggle for political power within the inner circle and intended to use the parachute forces to counteract the influence of the Waffen SS, since he had failed in his plan to make such use of the Luftwaffe field divisions.[2] In this connection, it is interesting to note that shortly after the order was issued to develop the parachute forces according to Goering's plan, Himmler succeeded in inducing Hitler to approve the activation of a parachute regiment within the framework of the Waffen SS.

Expansion of the airborne forces was begun without delay after approval by Hitler. The 3d and 4th Divisions were to be activated immediately. The 1st and 4th Divisions were to constitute the I FS Corps, and the 2d and 3d Divisions the II FS Corps. In October 1943, shortly before being transferred from Italy to Russia, the 2d Division assisted the activation of the 3d Division by giving up the 6th FS Regiment, which was split into separate cadres and deactivated.

---

[1] 7th Parachute Regiment. The abbreviation FS is used throughout the remainder of the manuscript in connection with unit designations.

[2] Excess German Air Force personnel were organized into field divisions for duty with the ground forces.

In November 1943 orders were given to activate a new 6th FS Regiment, with the former Ia[3] of the 2d FS Division as commander. Since the 2d FS Division was at that time committed at the Russian front, the new regiment was for the time being subordinated directly to the Parachute Army.

The initial organization of the new 6th FS Regiment was undertaken during the first days of January 1944 at the troop training grounds at Wahn. Activation, equipment, and training of the regiment were supposed to be completed by 1 April 1944. The regiment was organized along the general lines of an army infantry regiment. It was composed of three battalions, each consisting of three rifle companies and one heavy weapons (heavy machine gun and heavy mortar) company, one mortar company (the 13th), one antitank company (the 14th), one engineer platoon, and one bicycle reconnaissance platoon. In June 1944 the engineer and bicycle reconnaissance platoons were expanded to form the 15th and 16th Companies. In the summer of 1944, an antiaircraft defense company (the 17th), a motor transport company (the 18th), a supply and maintenance company (the 19th), and a replacement training company (the 20th) were added to the regiment, while the 13th to 17th companies inclusive were combined to form the 4th (heavy) Battalion. Each battalion had one signal communication platoon and one supply platoon in addition to the companies already mentioned. The supply platoon was responsible for the establishment of a battalion ammunition distributing point and the transportation of ammunition from this issuing center to the front line by means of carrier units. The regimental staff also had at its disposal a signal communication platoon as well as a motorcycle messenger platoon and a parachute servicing platoon. The parachute servicing platoon packed the parachutes for the entire regiment and saw to it that they were kept in serviceable condition. The total wartime strength of the regiment was slightly more than 4,500 officers, noncommissioned officers, and enlisted men.

The personnel replacements of the regiment at the beginning of 1944 were of high quality. One third of the officers and about one fifth of the noncommissioned officers were battle-tried parachutists, some of whom had fought in the battalion of the regimental commander in Crete, in Russia, and in North Africa. The enlisted personnel consisted entirely of young volunteers averaging seventeen and a half years in age. Four months of training sufficed to weld the regiment into a unified whole adequately prepared for ground combat as well as airborne operations. The regimental commander, who was known to be opposed to the training methods used by the parachute schools, was given permission to complete the jump training of the men himself; for

---

[3]Operations officer. This is the German equivalent of the U.S. Army G-3. In a division he also acts as chief of staff.

this purpose, one squadron of Junker 52's and one flight of Heinkel 112's were assigned to him at Wahn and placed under his command during the four training months, with the result that every member of the regiment was enabled to make nine jumps, including three night jumps. About 10 percent of the men were eliminated in the course of jump practice.

The regiment was in general better armed than the Army infantry regiments. Since each rifle squad was provided with two machine guns, in contrast to one in the Army, the fire power of the parachute companies was considerably greater than that of an Army rifle company; likewise, the fire power of the FS regiment's heavy weapons companies, which had twelve heavy machine guns and six heavy mortars each, was somewhat greater than that of the Army heavy weapons companies. In contrast to the Army and Waffen SS, the equipment and training of the regiment enabled it to employ all its heavy machine guns in concealed firing positions, a factor which proved effective in the subsequent fighting.

The 13th Company was at first equipped with twelve so-called chemical projectors, 105-mm mortars with a range of 3,500 meters. Unfortunately, these mortars were no longer being manufactured so that it was impossible to obtain replacements, and it became necessary to substitute medium mortars in some cases and heavy mortars in others.

The 14th Company comprised one 75-mm antitank platoon with four guns and three Panzerschreck (bazooka) platoons with six bazookas each; later on this company was also equipped with Pueppchen (heavy antitank rocket launchers).

All personnel of the regiment were trained to use magnetic antitank hollow charges and Panzerwurfminen (hollow charge antitank grenades) as well as Panzerfausts (recoilless antitank grenade launchers).

The 15th Company, by way of experiment, was provided with several Einstoss-Flammenwerfers (para-flamethrowers) which proved very effective.

The 17th Company, after its activation in the summer of 1944, was equipped with twelve 20-mm antiaircraft machine guns and four 20-mm triple-barreled guns.

The regiment's communication system was considerably better than that of an Army regiment. The signal communication platoon of each battalion had four telephone subsections and six radio sections, each

equipped with one "Dora"[4] instrument (later called a "Gustav"); the signal platoon of the regiment had four telephone subsections and one switchboard team having a 12-line switchboard, and six radio sections with one "Berta" instrument each. In addition there were two radio sections with one pack receiver each; each radio section also had one 35-watt instrument (for communicating with aircraft) and one 70-watt instrument (for communicating with ground forces during airlanding operations). The heavy weapons companies had their own communication sections, including telephone and pack radio subsections.

The regiment's motor transport was inadequate. On the average, each company had only two trucks. When the Allied invasion began, the regiment had a total of seventy trucks with a total capacity of slightly more than one hundred tons, but among them were more than fifty different types of manufacture--German, French, Italian, and British.

The regimental commander, in his last operations report before the beginning of the invasion, evaluated the regiment's combat efficiency as follows: "The regiment is completely fit for air landing operations, but only conditionally fit for ground combat because it does not have enough heavy antitank weapons and motor transport."[5]

## II. SITUATION ON THE COTENTIN PENINSULA PRIOR TO 6 JUNE 1944 INVASION

On 1 May 1944, after barely four months of training, the regiment received orders from the Air Force operations staff, bypassing the headquarters of the Parachute Army, to move to the area of Army Group Rommel in France, bringing with it its entire air landing equipment.

At army group headquarters, the regimental commander was informed that his regiment was being detached and assigned to the LXXXIV Corps at St. Lo. He was, however, unable to learn why orders had been issued to bring the air landing equipment.

Generalleutnant Marcks was the commanding general of the LXXXIV Corps and Lieutenant Colonel von Siegern was his chief of staff. Corps headquarters and the prearranged command post were located at the

---

[4]Code name for type of pack radio.

[5]It is not quite clear why the regimental commander evaluated his unit as being completely fit for air landing operations, but only conditionally fit for ground combat. One surely presupposes the other in the case of a systematic training, which the regiment had received. In matters of supply, the regiment was naturally always dependent on the support of Wehrmacht forces.--Pemsel.

northern edge of St. Lo, on the road to Carentan. Corps was in charge of the coastal defense of the entire Cotentin Peninsula and the area on both sides of the Vire Estuary; as far as the author can recall from a remark made by Generalleutnant Marcks, this covered a coastal strip of about five hundred kilometers.

With the exception of the 91st Grenadier Division and the 6th FS Regiment all divisions of the corps were committed to the defense of the coast at the time the invasion began.

The regiment received orders from Generalleutnant Marcks to assume responsibility for defense measures against parachute and air landing troops in the area Lessay (incl) - Periers (incl) - Raids (incl) - St. Georges-de-Bohon (incl) - Meautis (incl) - Baupte (excl) - Mont Castre (incl), that is, the southern part of the Cotentin Peninsula. The area to be protected was over twenty kilometers in width and almost fifteen kilometers in depth (Reference Map). The road distance from the western to the eastern border of the area was almost thirty-five kilometers, and from the northern to the southern border nearly twenty kilometers. Corps advised the regimental commander that the defense measures, planned and directed by Army Group Rommel, required that the troops were to be scattered through the area, and that small strong points were to be established from which the surrounding country could be controlled. Allied parachute units, no matter where they landed, would encounter a handful of well-placed, combat-ready German soldiers. In view of the advantages which such an arrangement offered, the dispersion of the regiment and the difficulty or even impossibility of concentrating its scattered units for rapid redeployment had to be risked.

The regimental commander was under the impression that the commanding general of the LXXXIV Corps was not in complete accord with this order from Army Group Rommel.

This was not the only case of disagreement between army group and its units; such dissension was apparent during the first days in Normandy. The army group also differed with army and corps on the conduct of operations in case of an invasion, or at least such was the impression of the regimental commander at the time. During a visit to regimental headquarters, Feldmarschall Rommel, who had known me since the North African campaign, summarized his views concerning the proper strategy approximately as follows: "The coast should be our main line of resistance for the following reasons: The enemy must be destroyed before he even sets foot on land. Once he has succeeded in establishing himself in a beachhead it will be very difficult for us to drive him out again; the invasion will have already been halfway successful."

This idea was at variance with the views of General Dollmann, who expressed himself to the regimental commander as follows: "In view of the thin line of coastal defense, we will scarcely be able to prevent the enemy from establishing a beachhead. It must be our task then to bring up all our forces as rapidly as possible to this beachhead in order to crush the enemy during the first days while it is still weak and before the enemy has had a chance to extend and improve its position." General Marcks appeared to be of the same opinion.[6]

The various members of the German command group in the West also disagreed on the location of possible and probable points of Allied landings. General Marcks expected the landings to take place north of the Vire estuary and on the eastern coast of the Cotentin Peninsula (as the author recalls, in the Coutances area) and found support for this assumption in maps which were carefully kept up-to-date and which showed the focal points of enemy air reconnaissance in May 1944. At the top level, it was evidently expected that landings would be concentrated north of the Seine estuary, approximately in the Boulogne area.

Apparently, the members of the command group were in agreement only in completely underestimating the potentialities of the Allied parachute and air landing forces. It was the general opinion that paratroopers would prefer wide open spaces. When Generaloberst Student, the commanding general of the German Parachute Army, objected to this conception on the grounds that modern paratroopers were also prepared to jump in wooded areas and villages, his objection was dismissed on the ground that he was boasting.

The obvious dissension prevailing among members of the higher command on questions of supply had the most disastrous effect. Two views were in conflict. Those who believed that the Allied air force would destroy all supply lines and railroad stations demanded that supply depots be established on a large scale in the rear of the forces. Others expected the attacks of the Allied air force to destroy immediately any depots set up prior to the start of the invasion, since their location would undoubtedly be betrayed to the Allies by the civilian

---

[6]The facts concerning the disagreements over fundamental problems of defense, which existed between Field Marshal Rommel on the one hand and Generaloberst Dollman and General Marcks on the other, have been aptly presented.--Pemsel.

population and wanted the supply bases located as far as possible from any prospective front.[7]

The troops available for a defense against an Allied landing were not comparable to those committed in Russia. Their morale was low; the majority of the enlisted men and noncommissioned officers lacked combat experience, and the officers were in the main those who, because of lack of qualification or on account of wounds or illness, were no longer fit for service on the eastern front. I should, of course, add that this is the personal opinion of a regimental commander who was transferred to Normandy in May 1944 and that his impressions were gained from attendance at training maneuvers and tactical rides during the first days of combat. It is possible that his experience was particularly unfortunate. It should not lead to any generalizing.

The situation with regard to the weapons and equipment of the forces in Normandy was nothing short of deplorable. Weapons from all over the world and from all periods of the twentieth century seemed to have been accumulated, in order to convey the impression of a mighty force. Later on, at Carentan, in the sector of the 6th FS Regiment, four different types of mortars (ranging in caliber from 78- to 81-mm) of German, French, Italian, and Russian make and seven kinds of light machine guns were committed on a front barely two kilometers wide.

In order to make the LXXXIV Corps mobile to some extent, or at least to make sure of essential transportation facilities for the units, each regiment of the corps was ordered to brand or otherwise mark horses and vehicles belonging to French civilians; these horses and vehicles were, however, to be left with their owners and were to be utilized only in case of an Allied invasion. It was, I believe, quite obvious to troops with combat experience, from the lowest ranks up to the regimental commander, that this order could not be carried out. Such orders were not conducive to improving combat morale or faith in victory on the part of the troops.

---

[7]The statements with regard to the dissension on questions of supply existing among members of the higher command, and the explanation therefor, are not based on fact. In this case, everyone was completely aware of the fact that the decentralization of the depots was a matter of necessity. As far as the effectiveness of enemy espionage and enemy air raids was concerned, it was immaterial whether the depots were located at the coast or deep in the interior. The shifting of depots in the long run always involved a problem of transportation facilities, which were never available in sufficient measure.--Pemsel.

The top-level command itself did not appear to have any great confidence in the troops in the west. Certainly only lack of confidence could account for one of Hitler's orders, which lower headquarters repeated but did not implement. This was the order issued in May 1944 which required every "strong-point commander" and every independent commander to give his written word of honor not to desert in case of an Allied invasion. Like many other "Fuehrer" orders issued at the time, this one was transmitted by the higher commands without comment. It was not enforced. When the commander of the 6th FS Regiment refused to give his word of honor or to compel his officers to do so, his refusal was readily passed over by his superiors.

The most disheartening comments were those made by General Marcks during a conversation with the author following a training maneuver in the Cherbourg area, when he described the situation as follows: "Emplacements without guns, ammunition depots without ammunition, mine fields without mines, and a large number of men in uniform with hardly a soldier among them."

## III. THE ALLIED ATTACK

Although the authorities were frequently at odds in their estimates as to where and how the Allied invasion would take place, it was nevertheless apparent that since the middle of May commanders as well as troops were agreed in assuming that an invasion was to be expected during the first ten days of June. Consequently, the lower headquarters were astonished when all division commanders and one regimental commander from each division, the corps artillery commanders, and the commanders of corps headquarters reserves, were ordered to report to Rennes on 6 June 1944 at 0830 in order to spend the entire day in an army group map exercise. It was rumored that this map exercise had been ordered by the Wehrmacht High Command, although the possibility existed that it was an idea of Rommel, who, in North Africa, liked to issue his orders in the form of map exercises.

The majority of the officers, who had been ordered to report, left for Rennes on the evening of 5 June and spent the night there. Consequently, about 50 percent of the division commanders and possibly 25 percent of the regimental commanders were not with their troops during the night of 5 June 1944.[8]

---

[8]The map exercise at Rennes, had been scheduled by Seventh Army for 1000 on 6 June 1944, not for 0830 as stated by the author. Instructions had been explicit that the departure of the participants for Rennes was to take place after a quiet night and not before the morning of 6 June. It is incomprehensible why some commanders left for Rennes as early as the afternoon of 5 June.--Pemsel.

On 4 June there had been increasing signs that the invasion was imminent. The French civilian population openly discussed the fact that an Allied landing was close at hand. On 4 June a cousin of General Leclerc laughingly told me a rumor that the invasion had been planned for the night of 4 June. During that night, all the French-speaking soldiers from Alsace-Lorraine, who had been serving in the regiment as drivers, deserted, with the exception of one who was found shot the next morning. These drivers had presumably been in contact with French resistance groups and had deserted immediately upon hearing that the invasion was imminent.

Since the middle of May 1944, the 6th FS Regiment had, in accordance with instructions, been distributed over a long line in field-type positions in the Lessay-Periers-Raids-Mont Castre area. The regiment was subordinated for tactical purposes to the LXXXIV Corps, for supply matters to the 91st Grenadier Division, and for administration to the II FS Corps. As a "flight unit," the parachute troops being considered "flight personnel," the regiment had been linked with the Cherbourg aircraft warning network.

The 91st Grenadier Division, the so-called air landing division of the Army general reserve was, at the beginning of 1944, activated as an Army unit at the troop training grounds at Baumholder. Generalleutnant Falley was the division commander and Lieutenant Colonel Pickel was the operations officer. The division command post was located near Etienville. Originally, the 91st Division had probably been designated for combined parachute and air landing operations, (Operation TANNE (fir tree) or Operation FICHTE (pine tree), planned for the beginning of March 1944) in conjunction with the 6th FS Regiment in one of the northern countries, possibly Finland. After this plan was abandoned, the 91st Grenadier Division, like the 6th FS Regiment, was sent to the LXXXIV Corps about 1 May 1944. The combat efficiency of this division was poor. On the morning of 6 June 1944, the division commander, who was on his way back from Rennes, was killed in front of his command post either by American paratroopers or by members of the French resistance. Command of the division was temporarily taken over by one of the regimental commanders, Colonel Klostermeyer, and later by Generalmajor Koehler, the commander of an adjacent division. The division was decimated during the first three days of the invasion; its remnants were for the time being attached to other divisions or withdrawn. The division staff was employed as a special assignments staff for the purpose of reconnoitering and preparing defensive positions behind the invasion front.

However, apart from the disruption of telephone connections, the death of the commander of the 91st Grenadier Division, and the demolition of the railroad tracks south of Periers, there was, during the

first days of the invasion, not the slightest sign of any activity by the French resistance movement in the district of the 6th FS Regiment and its immediate neighbors.

Late in the evening of 5 June, about 2230, the commander of the aircraft warning service in Cherbourg, a lieutenant serving with the signal troops, informed his regimental commander by telephone that Allied ship movements and the concentration of transport aircraft at British airfields seemed to indicate the possibility of an invasion that very night. Soon after, the signal officer of the 6th FS Regiment made the same report, and from 2300 on, the regimental commander was able to follow the approach of the Allied transports and fleets on the aircraft warning chart. At 2300, the regiment was alerted.[9]

A few minutes after the alert order had been transmitted to all elements of the 6th FS Regiment, a severe air bombardment began to the north and northwest of the regimental sector, about twenty kilometers from the regimental command post, which was located north of Periers. Shortly after midnight, the 1st Battalion, which was located in the Raids area, reported the landing of Allied paratroopers, and about 1300 it reported the capture of the first prisoners, Americans, who reported that they belonged to the U.S. 101st Airborne Division.

After midnight the regimental commander made futile attempts to establish telephone contact with the adjacent regiments, the 91st Grenadier Division, and the LXXXIV Corps. All German telephone lines in the regimental sector had apparently been cut by French resistance groups, as had the underground connection with the aircraft warning center in Cherbourg. Linesmen who were sent out were attacked at several locations; darkness made it impossible to ascertain whether they were fired on by isolated American paratroopers or French partisans. By dawn, the 3d Battalion had captured a few score prisoners and had pushed to the southeast the American paratroopers who had dropped in their sector.

About 0600 the regimental commander succeeded in establishing contact with General Marcks by way of the private telephone of his landlady and the French post office at St. Lo. After the regimental commander had informed General Marcks regarding the situation in the regimental sector he received this order from General Marcks: "Beginning immediately, the 6th FS Regiment will clear the Carentan area of enemy

---

[9] It is strange that the Seventh Army knew nothing of the approach of the Allied transports on 5 June, beginning at 2300 hours, as reported by the author.--Pemsel.

paratroopers and attack from that area the enemy paratroopers who have landed in the region between Carentan and Ste. Mere-l'Eglise in the rear of the 709th (?) Grenadier Division and destroy them. All German troops still holding out in the combat zone of the regiment will be placed under its command."

Because the regiment was insufficiently motorized, it was no easy task for the battalion commanders to withdraw their units from the widely separated strong points and to assemble them in the Meautis area, west of Carentan. South of the Carentan-Periers road, the 3d Battalion was still engaged in combat with scattered groups of enemy paratroopers who fought stubbornly; to the southeast and east the battalion covered in that area the assembly of the rest of the regiment. The 1st and 2d Battalions reached the assembly area in the early afternoon without making contact with the enemy.

The regimental commander had driven to Carentan in the morning in advance of the regiment. He found Carentan free of Allied troops and almost free of German troops; and between 1000 and 1100, without encountering enemy troops, he reached St. Come du Mont, where a German battalion had dug in. There he awaited instructions.[10]

An overwhelming picture presented itself to the regimental commander from the church tower of St. Come du Mont. Before him lay the coast and the sea. The horizon was strewn with hundreds of ships, and countless landing boats and barges were moving back and forth between the ships and the shore, landing troops and tanks. It was an almost peaceful picture; in the combat report which I submitted at the time to the Parachute Army, I wrote that it reminded me of a beautiful summer day on the Wannsee. The noise of battle could not be heard, and from the church tower of St. Come du Mont there was no sign of German defense activities. Only a shot rang out here and there whenever the sentries of the German battalions came in contact with Allied paratroopers.

---

[10] The fact that the 6th FS Regiment did not reach its assigned assembly area until the afternoon of 6 June proves that the extensive dispersal of the regiment for immediate protection against enemy air landings in endangered areas, as ordered by Field Marshal Rommel, was not prudent. Even if the enemy air landings had actually taken place in the quartering area of the regiment, assembling the regiment would have been out of the question. It was necessary to keep the regiment quartered closely together as much as possible so that, in case of enemy air landings, the regiment would be able to attack with concentrated force in any directions. In 1944 in Normandy we committed the same error which the British made at Crete in the spring of 1941 and which was the main reason for their loss of the island.--Pemsel.

The regimental commander established his command post in a defile just south of St. Come du Mont and ordered the 1st and 2d Battalions to be brought forward to the area of St. Come du Mont via the Douve Canal. He issued the following order to the battalion commanders: "The 2d Battalion will advance on Ste. Mere-l'Eglise on both sides of the St. Come du Mont-Ste. Mere-l'Eglise road; it will attack the enemy troops immediately upon contact and annihilate them. The 1st Battalion will cover the regiment on the line of Ste. Marie du Mont against enemy troops who have landed from the sea. The 13th Company will cover the advance of both battalions."

The 3d Battalion of the regiment remained in the Carentan area in order to protect the rear and the deep flanks of the regiment; the battalion of the Seventh Army reserve was placed under the control of the 6th FS Regiment and remained in its positions around St. Come du Mont.

At 1900, the 1st and 2d Battalions advanced from the area of St. Come du Mont. At first, both battalions proceeded rapidly. By nightfall they had not yet come into serious contact with the enemy. Around midnight, the advance elements of the 1st Battalion had arrived at Ste. Marie du Mont, while the 2d Battalion had reached a point about five hundred meters from the southern edge of Ste. Mere-l'Eglise. Both battalions sent a number of prisoners back to the regiment.

Some time after midnight (the author can no longer recall exactly when) matters took an unexpected turn. Throughout the entire combat zone of the regiment, American parachute and air landing units were again descending in large numbers. American paratroopers (members of the 82d Airborne Division, according to statements by prisoners), who had landed northwest of St. Come du Mont (I have forgotten the name of the exact place), threatened the rear and the deep left flank of the 2d Battalion; the units which had landed to the north and northeast of St. Come du Mont cut off the 2d Battalion from the regiment and from the 1st Battalion, while the American paratroopers who had descended east of St. Come du Mont in the very center of the area of the 1st Battalion, which was still advancing, threw this battalion into hopeless confusion.[11]

---

[11]During the encirclement of the enemy air landing forces on the Cotentin Peninsula, the German elements in the north, west, and south made the same mistake. While their attempt to attack as soon as possible was commendable, they failed to wait until stronger forces had been assembled for action; the attack was not launched in a coordinated manner; the security measures involved too great a drain of resources, and in view of the uncertain situation, they were very soon forced to assume the defensive.--Pemsel.

On the evening of 6 June 1944, the regimental commander was informed by the LXXXIV Corps that an attack coordinated by the Seventh Army and with strong artillery support was planned for 7 June, to be launched from the north, from the area of Montebourg, against Ste. Mere-l'Eglise. The regiment was given the mission of joining these elements in the area of Ste. Mere-l'Eglise. A defensive front was to be established on the Merderet River west of Ste. Mere-l'Eglise.

In attempting to recall the events of the night of 6 June 1944, it appears to the author not unlikely that the American air landing operations that night may have been intended to supply the troops who had jumped and landed at the beginning of the invasion, rather than to reinforce them. However, this was not apparent at the time, and the regimental commander therefore had at least to consider the possibility that these forces were combat troops presenting a serious threat. Consequently, during the early morning hours of 7 June, he instructed the 1st and 2d Battalions by radio to halt the advance, to re-establish at any cost contact with the regiment and with the adjacent battalions on the left and right, and after reorganization to redeploy in defensive positions in a semi-circle around St. Come du Mont at a distance of about one kilometer east and about three kilometers west of the town.

The 2d Battalion, stationed north of St. Come du Mont, acknowledged receipt of these instructions and at daybreak reported that they had been executed. It had not however been possible as yet to establish firm contact with the 1st Battalion. The radio station of the 1st Battalion made no response, and the order was sent blind.

Since it was impossible to reach the 1st Battalion by radio, the regimental commander made attempts immediately after daybreak to re-establish contact with the 1st Battalion by messenger, and when this also failed, by strong reconnaissance patrols of the bicycle reconnaissance platoon. However, about five hundred to eight hundred meters east of St. Come du Mont these reconnaissance patrols encountered enemy resistance which increased in intensity as the day went on. The elements of the Seventh Army reserve battalion committed east of St. Come du Mont reported contact with the enemy and strong pressure; about noon, the hostile forces, at first in small numbers, infiltrated their positions, bypassing them on the south, and reached the St. Come du Mont-Carentan road. In the early afternoon, it became necessary for the regimental commander to move two companies of the 3d Battalion from the Carentan area to the front, in order to strengthen the main line of resistance and extend it to the south and to repulse the enemy troops who had pushed forward along the St. Come du Mont-Carentan road. At the cost of heavy losses, they succeeded by nightfall in establishing a thin line about three hundred to five hundred meters east of the St. Come du Mont road. There was still no response whatever from the 1st Battalion.

The 2d Battalion was engaged in combat between St. Come du Mont and Ste. Mere-l'Eglise on both sides of the road with American units attempting to advance southward. On 7 June, severe clashes took place principally in the area of Addeville, which was held by the enemy.

After nightfall, enemy pressure increased in the east. Enemy reconnaissance patrols succeeded in infiltrating the weakly held German main line of resistance in terrain hidden from observation. About 2200, two American armored reconnaissance cars broke through and succeeded in reaching the Carentan road. A regimental messenger destroyed one of them directly in front of the regimental command post with a magnetic antitank hollow charge, and the other was put out of commission at the southern exit of St. Come du Mont by antitank fire.

In the early morning hours of 8 June the positions of the 13th Company and the regimental command post were subjected to a heavy enemy barrage which lasted about thirty minutes and resulted in casualties. At daybreak American assault detachments penetrated the sector of the Seventh Army reserve battalion and pressed forward as far as St. Come du Mont. Again its defense line began to disintegrate. From the regimental command post it was possible to observe first individual soldiers and then whole groups retreating westward from St. Come du Mont. The site of the battalion command post had also been changed and could not be located. Violent firing indicated that the elements of the 3d Battalion committed east of St. Come du Mont were engaged in heavy fighting.

In view of this situation, the regimental commander had no choice but to fall back behind the Douve Canal and conduct the defense of Carentan from there. He no longer had any reserves to close the gaps caused by the collapse of the Seventh Army reserve battalion, throw back the enemy troops who had broken through, or seal off the penetration. He issued the necessary orders to the regimental units fighting in the vicinity and to the two companies of the 3d Battalion. Since radio contact with the 2d Battalion had now also been disrupted, the order to withdraw was transmitted to the 1st Battalion as well as the 2d Battalion but with no way of determining whether or not it was received. Neither battalion ever received this order. The 1st Battalion, as the regimental commander learned later, had already been annihilated on 7 June, and the battalion commander had surrendered; only twenty-five men succeeded in making their way back to the regiment on 9 June through the marshy terrain along the Douve. The commander of the 2d Battalion also tried in vain to establish contact with the regiment; when this failed, he decided on his own responsibility to break through to Carentan by piercing the lines of the Americans who were already in his rear.

It was not easy for the regimental elements committed at St. Come du Mont to withdraw across the Douve. The majority of the men had to swim in order to reach the embankment of the Cherbourg-Carentan railroad line. The Americans apparently did not realize until later that this withdrawal was taking place; in any case, the widely scattered German paratroopers who were swimming across the Douve were subjected to but little fire, while the railroad embankment itself, which offered some cover, was not fired upon.

The regrouping of the elements which had crossed the Douve also took place without being affected by enemy action, so that it was possible for the 3d Battalion to be moved into positions in broad daylight and in fairly good order on the southern bank of the Oure,[12] a short distance from the northern edge of Carentan.

In the afternoon, the 2d Battalion, advancing over the railroad embankment, also reached Carentan without being subjected to serious enemy action. The regimental commander committed this battalion on the eastern edge of Carentan, the news having filtered through in the meantime that the Americans had entered Isigny (thirteen kilometers east of Carentan) and were advancing on Carentan from the east as well.

## IV. THE BATTLE FOR CARENTAN

Up to the morning of 8 June 1944, at least the regiment's noncommissioned officers and other enlisted men still hoped that it would be possible to drive back into the sea the Americans who had landed and to mop up the bridgehead north of the Vire estuary. After the withdrawal behind the Oure even the private soldier knew that the first battle of the invasion had been lost by the Germans. The morning of 8 June marked the beginning of the second catastrophic act of the drama in Normandy for the 6th FS Regiment: the battle for Carentan.

During the night of 8 June, elements of the 2d Battalion were, for security reasons, moved eastward as far as the Carentan-Isigny/Carentan-St. Lo road fork, 3.5 kilometers east of Carentan. These elements were not withdrawn to the eastern edge of Carentan until the evening of 9 June. On 9 June, reconnaissance patrols of the regiment pressed forward on a wide front as far as the Vire. The reconnaissance patrols of the regiment did not come across any German troops in position in the reconnoitered area. During 9 June, elements of the 2d Battalion of the 709th or 710th Infantry Regiment, which were committed

---

[12] This stream has not been identified. The area between Carentan and the Douve river is a maze of streams and ditches.

at the Canal du Port de Carentan, moved back toward Carentan. Other troops, including an "Eastern battalion"[13] under the command of a Major Becker, withdrew to Carentan from the Isigny area. On 9 June, a reconnaissance patrol of the regiment blasted the railroad bridge across the Vire, four kilometers southwest of Isigny.

For the defense of Carentan, which separated the two Allied bridgeheads south and north of the Vire Estuary, the corps attached to the regiment (which still remained under its direct control) two Eastern battalions composed of Russians, and the remnants of the Seventh Army reserve units from the Isigny area. The combat efficiency of these units was limited. In view of the fact that the main attack on Carentan was to be expected from the north, these units, which did not belong to the regiment, were for the most part committed on the eastern edge of Carentan, while the 2d and 3d Battalions established themselves in defensive positions at the two likely points of main effort: the demolished Douve bridges north of the city and at Pommenauque, where the railroad embankment reaches the southern bank of the Douve.

On 10 June, the commander of the American 101st Airborne Division[14] called upon the regiment to surrender; the regimental commander refused.

It was not so much the steadily increasing enemy pressure which made the defense of Carentan difficult as three unfavorable factors on the German side. The first of these was the lack of any artillery, except for one 88-mm antitank-antiaircraft battery which was attached to the regiment. The second was the slow but steady giving way of the units adjacent to the regiment. On the right, east of Carentan, the regiment was compelled to turn its front more and more southward until finally there was a southern front as well as an eastern front, while the actions of the units on the left, west of Carentan, forced the regiment to keep on extending its front until in the end it became necessary to maintain strong reconnaissance patrols to keep watch--not to occupy or to hold--over the area as far as the bridge at Baupte. The third factor was the shortage of ammunition, especially for the heavy infantry weapons which were the mainstay of the defense. Originally, the regiment had been instructed to obtain its ammunition from an ammunition distributing point where no ammunition had as yet been stored; then it was assigned one which, it turned out, had been destroyed in an enemy air raid; and finally, it had to depend on an ammunition point which, because the bridges leading to it had become impassable, could be reached

---

[13] A battalion consisting of personnel from non-German territories in the east.

[14] Major General Maxwell D. Taylor.

only by making long detours. By 11 June, the ammunition situation in the regiment had become so critical that the commander requested the Parachute Army via radio to have Junker 52's or Heinkel 112's supply ammunition by air. All the rifle ammunition of the rifle companies was collected and used for machine guns with the result that the riflemen were reduced to fighting with nothing but hand weapons.

During the night of 11 June, supply by air was actually carried out by the Parachute Army in an exemplary fashion. The ammunition was dropped south of Raids on a field, which had been marked off by lights, about fourteen kilometers behind the front line.

On the morning of 11 June 1944 at Pommenauque, the Americans succeeded in forcing the first deep penetration through the regiment's main line of resistance. It was not possible to clear up this penetration, but it was halted and sealed off by assault detachments.

As a result of the steady extension of the front and the heavy casualties, the regiment's main line of resistance was thinned to such an extent that the regimental commander had no doubt that on 12 June the Americans would succeed in effecting additional breakthroughs and consequently in capturing the city. In view of these circumstances, he no longer felt able to take responsibility for sacrificing the remainder of the regiment in the battle for Carentan and decided to evacuate the town in the late afternoon of 11 June.

Contrary to expectations, he succeeded in evacuating Carentan in broad daylight without interference by the enemy, who seemed to be reorganizing his forces. There is no doubt that during this evacuation of Carentan, as during the crossing of the Douve on 8 June, a determine pursuit by the Americans would have led to the annihilation of the regiment.

The regiment, together with subordinate elements, occupied a new defensive position southwest of Carentan. Hill 30, at the southwestern edge of the city, constituted the most important point of the new position.

The regimental commander had advised the LXXXIV Corps of his decision to surrender Carentan, and corps had approved this step. The regimental commander was therefore all the more astonished when, on the afternoon of 11 June, just after the main body of the regiment had evacuated its former positions, the commander of the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division[15] suddenly appeared and informed him that the division

---

[15]Commonly known as the "Goetz von Berlichingen" Division.

would arrive in the Carentan area the same night in order to take over the defense of Carentan. If the commander of the 6th FS Regiment had known only a few hours sooner that this division, whose foremost elements had already reached the Periers area early on the morning of 11 June, would be brought up, he would certainly never have made the decision to surrender Carentan. The LXXXIV Corps too had apparently not been informed in time of the arrival of this division, for there is no doubt that the corps, which maintained constant radio communication with the regiment, would have immediately transmitted this information, which after all had considerable bearing on the regiment's decisions; besides, the corps would never have approved the regiment's decision to evacuate Carentan. Consequently it can only be assumed that the army, the army group, or the Wehrmacht High Command, in this case going over the head of the corps, had ordered a division into the Carentan sector.[16]

---

[16]The premature surrender of Carentan on the afternoon of 11 June, which the commander of the 6th FS Regiment decided on his own responsibility, was an incomprehensible and ill-advised step on his part, since he had been informed of the commitment of the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division at Carentan in advance and not afterward, as claimed by the author. According to the records of the Seventh Army, they informed the LXXXIV Corps by telephone as early as 1300 on 10 June and then again on 11 June at 1145 that "the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division was assembled for attack at Carentan." According to statements made by the chief of staff of the LXXXIV Corps, he apprised the commander of the 6th FS Regiment in person of the commitment of this division not later than 10 June.

Neither the army nor the corps were in accord with this independent decision of the commander of the 6th FS Regiment, because one of the most essential tasks of the Seventh Army of necessity should have consisted in preventing, as long as possible, the Americans from establishing contact between their forces on the Cotentin Peninsula and their forces stationed east of the Vire and with the British.

Afterwards, an attempt was made to justify the premature surrender of Carentan, which was a vital junction point, by pointing to the shortage of ammunition. It was at that time impossible to unequivocably fix the responsibility for this action. As a result of the previous severe and disastrous battles, the commander of the 6th FS Regiment had suffered a temporary physical and mental breakdown. This also explains his "misguided order" which, following the surrender of Carentan, he issued in connection with the occupation of the decisively important Hill 30 southwest of Carentan.

Only the fact that his command of the regiment had so far been outstanding and that he made a speedy recovery prevented the commander of the 6th FS Regiment from being punished or relieved of his command.--Pemsel.

The 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division was commanded by Brigadefuehrer Ostendorf, and Obersturmbannfuehrer Konrad was operations officer. After the division arrived in the vicinity of Carentan, the division command post was located at St. Sebastien-du-Raids, sixteen kilometers southwest of Carentan. The division was composed of two motorized infantry regiments, three battalions each, one reconnaissance battalion, one assault gun battalion, one artillery regiment, one engineer battalion, one signal battalion, and the supply services. After Brigadefuehrer Ostendorf was wounded at the end of June 1944, Brigadefuehrer Baum took over command of the division.

The 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division had been activated during the first months of 1944 and as yet only a few of its elements had had contact with the enemy in the area extending from Caen to Bayeux. Although the division was well armed and well equipped, it was surprisingly poorly trained. The majority of the officers had had neither the training nor the combat experience to enable them to fill their positions adequately. In general, the commanders of the regiments, the artillery and other battalions did not possess the elementary knowledge of tactics required of an officer candidate. The low standard of training of the officers of the division's artillery regiment was particularly noticeable. Like the Italian artillery, with which I had become acquainted in North Africa, the artillery of the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division was not able to concentrate its fire flexibly in brief bursts after observation or to fire ahead of attacking infantry from sector to sector (or in Normandy, from hedge to hedge). The artillery of the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division usually fought a "private war" without paying any attention to the infantry.

Since the units of the 6th FS Regiment were already in the process of withdrawing when the commander of the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division arrived, and as the Seventh Army reserve units subordinated to the 6th FS Regiment had already occupied their new positions, it was no longer possible to revoke the regimental commander's decision to evacuate Carentan. The commander of the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division therefore decided to attack and recapture Carentan, and on the evening of 11 June he and the commander of the 6th FS Regiment reconnoitered the prospective terrain of attack.

During the occupation of the new position southwest of Carentan the commander of the 6th FS Regiment made a fateful error. He had at first ordered this position to be occupied not by his own regiment, but by the Eastern battalions and other Seventh Army units under his command, which he had withdrawn from the old position east and north of Carentan, where they had been distributed among the organic units

of the regiment. He had intended to rehabilitate and reorganize on 12 June, immediately behind the new position, the regimental units and the two battalions of the regiment still under his command, and not to commit them again in the foremost line until the night of that day. On the basis of his previous, although very limited, experience with the Americans he did not expect them to attack until 13 June.

In fact, on 12 June the American 101st Airborne Division, seemed to have had in mind nothing more than combat reconnaissance for the time being. However, during these operations an American reconnaissance patrol or assault detachment succeeded in capturing Hill 30 which was apparently half-heartedly defended by an Eastern battalion. This event also threatened seriously the new position of the regiment; the regimental commander believed it was out of the question to attack Carentan before recapturing Hill 30. Attacks on Hill 30 which were launched on 12 June by the engineer platoon under the personal leadership of the regimental commander were unsuccessful.

While the German paratroopers were fighting for Hill 30, one motorized infantry regiment, one assault gun battalion, and the main body of the artillery regiment of the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division moved into assembly positions in the area north of Meautis for the attack on Carentan. It was the aim of the commander of the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division to attack eastward on both sides of the Baupte-Carentan road, to capture Pommenauque, and to push on into Carentan from the northwest corner of the city. He expected that the Americans would of their own accord give up Hill 30 without a fight as soon as the division elements succeeded in penetrating the northwestern part of Carentan. Although the assault guns would be restricted to the Baupte-Carentan road and a few narrow side roads by the nature of the terrain, the division commander expected a great deal from them because he felt certain that the Americans would fall back in the bocage terrain to the right and left of the road, where observation was impossible, as soon as the assault guns succeeded in breaking through. The division commander did not wish to use any artillery preparation in order to maintain as far as possible the element of surprise. The 6th FS Regiment as such did not participate in the attack; only its 2d Battalion was placed under the command of the attacking SS regiment and committed by the latter at the left of the above-mentioned road, on both sides of the railroad embankment extending from Baupte to Carentan, in very difficult terrain poorly suited for attack. The 3d Battalion of the 6th FS Regiment was placed at the disposal of the division, but the regimental staff and units were not included in the framework of the plan of attack or in the order based on this plan.

The same reasoning which prompted the division commander to forego any artillery preparation also induced him to be totally opposed to

battle reconnaissance operations on 12 June. As a result, the enemy situation was still completely obscure when the attack began. Reconnaissance reports on the foremost enemy positions and the strength of the enemy were not available. The attacking forces were consequently compelled to grope their way, while advancing in terrain quite unfavorable for offensive operations. Nevertheless, the division commander was confident of success. One of the questions he put to the commander of the 6th FS Regiment on 12 June when issuing instructions was as follows: "After Carentan has been captured, would you prefer to continue advancing towards Isigny or wheel to the left toward Ste. Mere-l'Eglise?"

On the morning of 13 June, about 0700, the attack was launched from the assembly positions. On 12 June, the Americans had apparently only employed patrols in order to reconnoiter the new German position. In any event, during the first two hours of the attack, the attacking forces did not come into contact with the enemy. About eight hundred meters west of the northwestern edge of Carentan, the assault gun units encountered antitank elements which prevented them from advancing any further. About 0900 the SS troops and paratroopers made contact with strong American elements; it was my impression that these were not organized for defense but were in the process of advancing.

Severe fighting raged from hedge to hedge, at close quarters and hand to hand. The paratroop forces nevertheless succeeded in gaining several hundred meters of terrain north of the railroad embankment, while the SS panzer grenadier units were stopped cold in unfamiliar terrain where observation was obstructed.

The exercise of command in such terrain is extremely difficult. During combat, the SS units became disorganized and commanders, no longer masters of the situation, lost control of their units to an increasing degree; communications were disrupted, sometimes at one and sometimes at another point; gaps developed through which the enemy skillfully infiltrated. At one farm, the division commander himself was for several minutes engaged in close combat with enemy troops who had broken through. In short, by about 1200, it was obvious that for this day the attack on Carentan had failed.

The casualties among the SS forces were unusually high; the fighting spirit of the inexperienced troops was weakened; and an ever-increasing number of individual SS soldiers as well as whole groups straggled to the rear, so that the commander of the 6th FS Regiment had to instruct his adjutant to check the fleeing SS forces and assemble them in the vicinity of his regimental command post. In some instances the adjutant was compelled to enforce this order at the point of a gun.

While the attack on Carentan launched by the SS troops was thus hopelessly bogged down, the commander of the 6th FS Regiment received about noon alarming reports from Baupte. The 100th Panzer Battalion of the Seventh Army reserve had been committed at the Douve River in the area of Baupte, at first facing eastward. For unknown reasons the commander of this battalion evacuated these positions on the Douve on the morning of 12 June and dug in in Baupte proper, after which he and a few other officers left his battalion. In the meantime, the Americans had apparently crossed the Douve without encountering resistance and had cautiously approached Baupte. There utter chaos apparently prevailed among the German forces; some of the troops who had been forsaken by their commander surrendered, while others still tried to fight. There was no doubt, however, that it would be only a matter of hours before the Americans were in undisputed possession of Baupte and thereby threaten the flank and the rear of the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division. In view of this situation, the commander of the 6th FS Regiment sent one company of the 2d Battalion, which was engaged in combat west of Carentan, to protect the bridge east of Baupte against forces advancing from Baupte to attack the rear of the division. Anxious hours passed until this company arrived at Baupte, for there was a distinct possibility that the American commander in Baupte would recognize his opportunity and make a quick decision to push across the bridge. The danger was not over until about 1600.

In the meantime the situation west of Carentan continued to deteriorate. The commander of the 6th FS Regiment was under the impression that a single energetic thrust by the Americans would be sufficient to induce large portions of the SS regiment to take to headlong flight, which would result in a deep breach at a decisive point in the German lines--a breach which might make possible a breakthrough during the night. He therefore employed his 3d Battalion and the regimental units to form a rear line along the road leading from Raids southeastward to the Carentan-Periers road. He placed the dazed commander of the SS regiment under his command, and ordered the SS and paratroop forces to fall back to a position which had been reconnoitered and in part improved prior to the invasion. This extended from Le Varimesnil, southwest of Meautis (which was to be given up), and along the southern edge of a marshy valley, to a point north of Raffoville (about three kilometers northeast of Blehou) at the eastern edge of the big "swamp" (Prairie des Gorges). In relation to the jump-off point for the attack on Carentan, the withdrawal to this position amounted to retiring generally about four kilometers. The regimental commander considered it absolutely essential to get beyond the range of the American heavy infantry weapons which would require the Americans to shift the position of these weapons and especially to advance their artillery to the south side of the Oure.

The cover provided by the wooded terrain, which rendered the daytime attack so difficult, facilitated disengagement from the enemy and withdrawal even in daylight. Without marked interference by the enemy, the SS regiment and the 2d Battalion of the 6th FS Regiment, crossing the rear line formed by the 3d Battalion of the 6th FS Regiment, moved into the new position in which, by verbal agreement between the two regimental commanders, the SS regiment was committed on the right, to about 300 meters northwest of the main road from Carentan to Periers, with the point of main effort at the road. The FS regiment was committed on the left.

While the commander of the FS regiment was supervising the withdrawal of the retreating elements of his regiment along the road leading southeastward from Baupte to the Carentan-Periers road, he was suddenly called for personally by the operations officer of the SS division and escorted to the division command post. There he was reproached by the division commander for his arbitrary actions and his "cowardice in the face of the enemy," as indicated by his order to withdraw. The division commander informed him that he was under arrest and that very night had him questioned by an SS military judge.

However, the next morning, when the commanding general of the II FS Corps, who was temporarily in charge of the LXXXIV Corps, approved the conduct of the commander of the 6th FS Regiment, the commander of the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division released the regimental commander, and allowed him to return to his regiment.

The reader may wonder at the strange lack of activity on the part of the LXXXIV Corps during the second phase of the battle for Carentan. The initiative was taken exlusively by the division and the regiments. The reason for this inactivity by the corps can be found in the fact that during this period the corps commanders were being continuously changed. On 12 June, the day on which the evacuation of Carentan took place, General Marcks, then commanding general of the LXXXIV Corps, was killed in an attack by fighter-bombers on the Carentan-St. Lo road. General Fahrmbacher, the commanding general of the XXV Corps, was first appointed to succeed him, but as early as 12 or 13 June General Meindl, the commanding general of the II FS Corps, was assigned to act as commander of the LXXXIV Corps. Then, one or two days later, General von Choltitz arrived to take over the LXXXIV Corps.

To complete the record, it should be noted that during the night of 11 June the 6th FS Regiment was, in accordance with its request, actually supplied by the Parachute Army with sufficient ammunition by air, by means of Junker 52's and Heinkel 112's. After 12 June, the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division assumed responsibility for the regiment's supply.

With the conclusion of the battle for Carentan, the 6th FS Regiment broke off contact with the American 101st Airborne Division which had been its first opponent during the invasion battles; the regiment was not to meet these forces again until September, when it encountered them at Schijndel, Holland. During and after the war, the commander of the 6th FS Regiment was frequently asked for his opinion of the American paratroopers. The caliber of the American paratroopers who fought against the regiment was outstanding; they were excellently trained in combat techniques and their armament and equipment were first-class. The regiment experienced similar stubborn fighting only against the Russian NKVD divisions,[17] the British 52d (Highland) Division, and the Canadian 1st Infantry Division. However, as in the German parachute forces, the tactical ability of the American command, from the lower echelons up to and including division level, did not always appear to be on a par with the excellent combat efficiency of the units. During the first days of the invasion, the Americans could have saved a great deal of time and avoided many casualties if their troops had made their jumps and landings directly into the target to capture individual objectives of tactical importance, such as the Douve bridges north of Carentan. In Normandy, as later on at Arnhem, the Americans seem to have employed the same tactics of jumping and landing some distance away from the target and then attacking the tactically important individual objective on the ground, a method which did not always lead to immediate victory. In 1944, the Americans seemed to be unfamiliar with the procedure of capturing villages or small towns from the air by jumping into them. I am not in a position to offer any opinion concerning the technical aspects of night jumping, because I have no data indicating the speed with which these units were able to assemble nor the percentage of those who made false landings. The Americans proved to be far superior to the Germans in the employment of troop-carrying gliders at night. It was odd that the Americans did not use Sturzlastensegler[18] even where their commitment would have been advantageous.

In the opinion of the German parachute troops, the American 101st Airborne Division, and particularly its 506th Regiment,[19] far surpassed the other American airborne units because its commander and staff were on a par with the outstanding combat efficiency of the troops themselves.

---

[17] Field divisions of the NKVD, the former GPU.

[18] Dive glider.

[19] Commanded by Col. Robert F. Sink.

# CHAPTER 2

## THE WITHDRAWAL

### I. FIGHTING IN THE MEAUTIS AREA

After the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division, in conjunction with the 6th FS Regiment, had withdrawn to the line running from Le Varimesnil to a point southwest of Meautis to Raffoville to Prairies de Gorges, there was a lull in the fighting in the sector on both sides of the Carentan-Periers road, which was interrupted only by small-scale reconnaissance, patrol operations, and light artillery action on the part of the German as well as the American forces.[1] The 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division had in the meantime brought up its second regiment, which had not yet participated in the struggle for Carentan, and committed it on the right flank of its sector, to the right of the Carentan-Periers road, with the main body probably at the Taute depression.[2]

In the middle of June 1944 the lower units were apprised of the German plan to place around the Allied beachhead an "iron ring," which was to hold out until the arrival of fresh troops and materiel made it possible to attack the beachhead and wipe it out. Never before, either in Russia or in North Africa, had the troops of the 6th FS Regiment witnessed on the German side such an accumulation of materiel and troops for purely defensive purposes.

In the sector on both sides of the Carentan-Periers road, commanders and troops did their utmost to form this iron ring. During the second half of June the 5th FS Division was committed in a second line behind the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division. In addition, an antitank barrier (Panzerabwehrriegel) was set up in this second line with several Seventh Army controlled heavy antitank battalions equipped with

---

[1] The inaction on the Carentan front on the part of the Americans following their capture of this vital junction point was due to their wise decision to establish firm contact quickly between their forces on the Cotentin Peninsula and their forces east of the Vire, and also with the British.--Pemsel.

[2] Vicinity of St. Georges de Bohon.

self-propelled mounts and "Panther" tank destroyers.

The commander of the 5th FS Division was Generalleutnant Wilcke and Major Reimann served as operations officer, but neither was a paratrooper. The division was activated in January 1944, and until June was stationed at Auxerre in central France; at the end of May it was transferred to the Rennes area in Brittany. The combat efficiency of this division was poor. Barely 10 percent of its personnel had received jump training and not more than 20 percent of its officers had had infantry training or combat experience. Weapons and equipment were neither complete nor uniform; only 50 percent of the units were equipped with machine guns; one regiment had no steel helmets; no heavy antitank weapons were available and there were no motor vehicles. Beginning in the middle of June, the division was brought up and committed at the front in piecemeal fashion;[3] at first, during the second half of June the 15th FS Regiment was employed behind the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division; then, at the beginning of July, this same regiment was committed in the Mont Castre area, and finally, in the middle of July, the main body of the division was employed in the area of Marigny, west of St. Lo.

During the last days of June, 1,000 replacements were assigned to the 6th FS Regiment but owing to incompetent leadership, 170 men were lost while still on the march, from wounds, death, or in a few isolated cases, probably from desertion. The replacements were unarmed and their clothing and equipment were amazingly poor; about one-third of the troops did not even possess steel helmets, while the footgear of more than 50 percent of the men was torn; their training and fighting spirit seemed inferior to that of the original cadre of the regiment. It was only with great difficulty that the regiment succeeded in obtaining weapons, clothing, and equipment for the replacements.

The troops committed in the forward line, at least those in the sector of the 6th FS Regiment, utilized the three-week lull in the fighting to dig in and to establish a consecutive system of positions, with a double line of trenches at the focal defense points.

In the first days in July, the regiment reported to the division that enemy troop movements in the area of Baupte, which had been followed by observers and reconnaissance patrols, indicated that the

---

[3] The 5th FS Division was committed in piecemeal fashion by order of the Wehrmacht High Command, because its individual units were not uniformly organized or trained.--Pemsel.

Americans were going to attack; and one or two days after this report, the Americans actually launched an attack on the left of the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division, in the Mont Castre area. This American attack induced the higher command to withdraw from their positions the units of the 5th FS Division which were stationed in the second line behind the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division, as well as the heavy antitank battalions which formed the antitank barrier on both sides of the Carentan-Periers road, and to commit them in the area of Mont Castre.

The day after this withdrawal, the Americans also attacked in the sector of the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division, with the main effort, at least as far as could be seen from the German side, concentrated at two points, the Carentan-Periers road and Raffoville. At the former, the Americans encountered the SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment Fick, while at the latter they faced the 6th FS Regiment.

During this attack in the sector of the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division, the impression was gained on the German side that the Americans intended to tie down the German forces at whichever point they encountered the greater resistance, and at the other to effect a breakthrough deep enough to enable them to roll up the front of the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division from the point of penetration and strike the deep flank of the German forces which had been tied down at the first point.

In the sector of the 6th FS Regiment, during the first day of the attack, a breakthrough was effected at Raffoville. It was, however, possible to stop this, and with the aid of an SS assault gun detachment to mop up by evening. The SS regiment, which was committed along the Carentan-Periers road, also claimed to have cleared up all breakthroughs.

After one day of rest, the Americans repeated the attack in the same manner and apparently based on the same plan. While on that day too it was possible in the sector of the 6th FS Regiment to straighten out a comparatively deep American breakthrough by evening and to reestablish the old main line of resistance, the situation in the sector of the SS regiment on the right did not seem to be entirely favorable for the German forces, in spite of optimistic situation reports submitted by the regimental commander in charge there. In any event, it was definite that the Americans on that very day had succeeded in effecting a deep penetration at the Carentan-Periers road, which the SS forces were no longer able to clean up.

By the third or fourth day of the attack, the Americans had pushed forward on the Carentan-Periers road to such an extent that their foremost elements were abreast the regimental command post of the 6th FS Regiment. Since, from the very beginning, the main line of resistance of the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division had formed a 90-degree angle with the right wing of the 6th FS Regiment opposite Meautis, the position of the latter regiment now formed a deep salient protruding into the American front. The paratrooper forces constituted the point and left (northern) flank of this wedge, while its right (southern) flank was formed by the reconnaissance battalion of the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division which, for the purpose of sealing off the American breakthrough at the Carentan-Periers road, had been placed under the control of the 6th FS Regiment. The point of the wedge was turned eastward, towards Meautis. The division had originally instructed the 6th FS Regiment to hold this wedge at all costs, since it intended to attack southward from this wedge in order to seal off the point of the American penetration.

However, this counterattack, which did not offer much chance of success, failed to materialize. The unit to the left of the division had in the meantime lost Mont Castre, and counterattacks launched by the parachute troops of the 5th FS Division did not recapture this dominating height. Either army or the corps, probably chiefly influenced by this loss, consequently decided to evacuate the old positions which had been bent inward and penetrated at many points, and to withdraw to a new line of defense in the Seves sector.

In order to execute this plan the 6th FS Regiment was given instructions on about noon of 8 or 9 July to evacuate immediately the salient protruding in the direction of Meautis and to occupy a position which extended northward in a fairly straight line, from the road block at La Roserie on the Carentan-Periers road to the southeastern corner of the Prairie de St. Gorges. The regiment was charged with the responsibility for the Carentan-Periers road and the defense of the road block; the reconnaissance battalion of the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division remained under the control of the 6th FS Regiment.

On the right, south of Carentan-Periers road, the remnants of the two regiments of the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division, which had been combined into a single Kampfgruppe (combat group), joined the 6th FS Regiment; they were reinforced by the remnants of the assault gun battalion of the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division and one battalion, belonging to the tank regiment of the 2d SS Division,[4] whose tanks were

---

[4]Commonly known as "Das Reich" Division.

equipped with P IV flat trajectory guns. These tanks, probably on orders from a higher commander, were to be dug in at regular intervals along the forward line to provide strong points.

The withdrawal of the 6th FS Regiment from this salient to the new main line of resistance was a fairly difficult undertaking. The Americans, employing strong forces, had been attacking the point of the salient since the early hours of the morning, and there was a great danger that the constant enemy pressure would panic an orderly withdrawal into a disorganized flight. On that day for the first time American close support aircraft heavily strafed the forward areas and handicapped all movements in the main defensive position. Nevertheless, at about 1700 the 6th FS Regiment succeeded in evacuating with some degree of order the point of the wedge, in which the command post of the 3d Battalion was located; however it was not until dusk, when the Americans ceased attacking, that the regiment was able to extricate itself from the critical situation and complete the withdrawal.

In the new position the defense of the road block was entrusted to the 16th Company of the FS Regiment, which was composed of highly qualified soldiers, under the direct control of the regiment. To the left of this company, but on the right flank of the regiment, the reconnaissance battalion of the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division was committed.

Whereas at Carentan the Americans had always pursued the withdrawing FS Regiment with caution and had thus always given them enough time to establish themselves in a new position of defense, this time the Americans remained close on the heels of the withdrawing German units. The next morning the Americans launched an attack against the new position along the entire width of the regimental front. This position had been improved in some measure but only on the left flank. The reconnaissance battalion of the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division, for instance, had at dawn not yet been able to dig in.

During the day various lesser breakthroughs took place as expected. However it was possible everywhere to halt and seal them off. Only in the sector of the reconnaissance battalion of the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division did the situation remain obscure and critical. Alarming reports were received from the unit on the right, where individual American tanks and infantry troops had apparently succeeded in penetrating the thin line held by infantry and tanks. It was impossible to gain a clear picture of the situation.

I am no longer able to state exactly whether the regiment remained in this position for one or for two days; in any event, during the first or second night it withdrew to its final position in the Seves sector.

This withdrawal too was considerably handicapped because of the deep penetration which the Americans effected during the afternoon in the sector of the reconnaissance battalion of the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division and which led to the complete disintegration and annihilation of this battalion. Again, the regimental command post appeared to be threatened by individual American tanks which had rushed ahead, and again, a determined continuation of the American infantry attack during the night would have meant certain annihilation of the regiment and a consequent rolling up of the entire German position in the Seves sector.

## II. FIGHTING IN THE SEVES SECTOR

The position of the 6th FS Regiment in the Seves sector was in more than one respect similar to the position held in the area of Raffoville. In this new position, too, the main line of resistance formed a 90-degree angle with the right flank of the regiment and then ran for the most part parallel to the Carentan-Periers road. Although the regiment had been relieved of the responsibility for the Carentan-Periers road, any breakthrough at this road would nevertheless endanger the entire position of the regiment. After the position had been occupied there was a lull in the fighting which lasted several days and which made it possible for the regiment to improve its position.

On the night during which the front was finally withdrawn to the Seves sector the 2d SS Division arrived in the Periers area and took over the sector formerly held by the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division. The latter division and the 6th FS Regiment were placed under the command of the 2d SS Division. The two motorized infantry regiments of the 2d SS Division, the 4th Panzer Grenadier Regiment[5] and the 3d Panzer Grenadier Regiment[6] were committed on the right of the 6th FS Regiment between Auxais and the Carentan-Periers road (incl.); the remnants of the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division, combined into a single combat group, were inserted at the extreme right wing of the 2d SS Panzer Division. The 2d SS Panzer Regiment was placed by battalions behind the individual infantry regiments[7] and instructed to cooperate with these regiments. The division's request for the commitment of tanks as strong points in the main line of resistance was rejected, except for a few individual cases. In the sector of the 6th FS Regiment, in conformity with the wishes of the regimental commander, no such commitment took place.

---

[5] Commonly known as "Der Fuehrer" Regiment.

[6] Commonly known as the "Deutschland" Regiment

[7] Schuetzen-bzw. Jaegerregimenter, rifle or infantry regiments or light infantry regiments.

Brigadefuehrer Lammerding served as division commander and Obersturmbannfuehrer Stoecker as operations officer of the 2d SS Panzer Division. After Lammerding was wounded, about 23 July, command of the division was assumed by Standartenfuehrer Tychsen, and after the latter's death by Brigadefuehrer Baum, former commander of the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division. The division's unit commanders and troops were well trained and experienced in combat. Their equipment was excellent. Between the end of June and the beginning of July the division had been transferred to Normandy from southern France where it had been fighting the French Resistance forces.

The combat efficiency of the 2d SS Panzer Division was far superior to that of the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division. It was more powerful from the standpoint of organizational structure alone, for instead of one assault gun battalion the division had a tank regiment consisting of five battalions. However, the main difference was not in organization but in the quality of the officers. Most of the unit commanders up to and including the regimental commanders had several years of combat experience and those up to and including company commanders had a sufficient knowledge of tactics to enable them to fill their posts satisfactorily. The enlisted men were, consequently, also better trained. In this division one frequently came across men of a type probably best described as "mercenary" or "legionary." It may be significant that among the parachute troops the so-called penal company, composed of men convicted of minor military or political offenses, was very soon looked upon as the best unit in the entire division.

The artillery of the 2d SS Panzer Division was particularly good. Perfect observation facilities, for which the commander of the 6th FS Regiment had constantly and fruitlessly struggled with the artillery commander of the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division, were taken for granted in the artillery of the 2d SS Panzer Division. The "rigid plan of fire," employed during recognized enemy attack under fog or smoke-screen or when observation was otherwise impeded; the "barrage fire belt," which was the prerequisite for this "rigid plan of fire," and the necessary supplementation of the barrage fire for areas covered by heavy infantry weapons were no longer merely a pious desire of the infantry but a reality and consequently constituted a valuable strengthening of the defense. In order to impede the sound and flash reconnaissance of the Americans, it was an established rule during sudden concentrations to combine all available guns of the division artillery and any special supporting artillery, with the result that every gun fired only a few rounds. In the 2d SS Panzer Division cooperation between artillery and infantry, from the advanced observers

in the forward line up to regimental commander, was outstanding; requests made by the infantry, even if they involved only such matters as noise deception, were always taken into consideration.[8]

The conduct of infantry operations also improved after the units moved into position in the Seves sector. For one thing, the commander of the 6th FS Regiment had, on the basis of his recent experiences, constructed a major secondary line 300 to 800 meters behind the main line of resistance. Although thinly manned it was connected to the main line of resistance by connecting trenches and in case of an enemy breakthrough the defense could be conducted from this position. For another thing, the 2d SS Panzer Division had brought with it tactical concepts learned in Russia with which the western divisions, unaccustomed to combat, were not familiar. For instance, the division made it a rule to place a unit behind every regimental and division sector to act as a reserve for counterattacks in case of enemy penetrations at particularly dangerous boundary positions.

For over a week no major operations took place in the sector of the 2d SS Panzer Division. It was not until about 20 July that strong American forces launched an attack on the left wing of the 6th FS Regiment. Owing to the fact that the main line of resistance was thinly manned, approximately one enemy battalion succeeded in penetrating this line and holding out for one night in a group of farm buildings after the gap in the line was again closed. The regimental commander did not know the exact strength of the Americans who had infiltrated but according to his own observation, he believed it to be a reconnaissance patrol and therefore ordered the 16th Company which, at the time, was still twenty men strong, to annihilate this reconnaissance patrol with the aid of one tank from the 2d SS Panzer Division. (The tracks of a second tank, which was to have participated in this action, were damaged during the advance.) A brief engagement followed, during which the German forces for the first time employed Panzerfausts as a close combat weapon against infantry forces in concrete or brick buildings. They were surprisingly successful. The company captured more than three hundred prisoners, among them thirteen officers including a battalion commander. During the mopping up of this American breakthrough, the regiment captured more than five hundred prisoners, including wounded Americans, who were assembled behind our main line of resistance by our medical noncommissioned officers. This

---

[8] The author is correct in stating that the 2d SS Panzer Division was one of the best of the armored divisions. The weaknesses in the command of the artillery, which were present in almost every SS division, did not exist in this division.--Pemsel.

was the largest number of prisoners captured since the beginning of the invasion.[9]

It might be appropriate at this point to say something about the manner in which operations were conducted. With certain exceptions, the fighting on both sides was invariably gallant and fair, at least in the 6th FS Regiment's sector both at Meautis and Seves. At different times, the Americans after severe fighting proposed a truce in order to make possible the collection of wounded men from no man's land; such a truce was then scrupulously observed by both sides. Once, when about ten medical noncommissioned officers, who belonged to the U.S. infantry division commanded by General Macon, were searching for wounded men and lost their way in the Meautis area and happened to get behind the German main line of resistance into the vicinity of a battalion command post, they were returned to their division by the commander of the 6th FS Regiment. On the other hand American forces, as far as they were able, always replied to inquiries concerning the fate of wounded men. Frequently wounded men were exchanged in the forward lines.[10]

Aside from the above-described attack in the Seves sector, it is probable that only one other major American attack was launched at this time in the sector of the 2d SS Panzer Division; as I recall, this took place along the Carentan-Periers road and south of it. Otherwise, the Americans, according to the impression gained by the German lower commanders, made only cautious probing movements against the division's positions with strong assault detachments.

The situation seemed to be less stabilized on the right of the division in the area west of St. Lo, where the 2d SS Panzer Division was joined by the 5th FS Division, the quality of whose officers was reputed to be extremely poor. They consisted for the most part of officers from the Air Force ground personnel, who had no infantry

---

[9]The almost incredible victory achieved by twenty paratroopers with one tank against an American battalion which had broken through and of which five hundred enlisted men and thirteen officers were captured, occurred because the actual strength of the Americans was at first underestimated, the attack was launched audaciously in spite of the uncertainty of the situation, the field of vision was obscured, and the first large-scale use of Panzerfausts in house to house fighting had a significant effect on morale.--Pemsel.

[10]The character of the forces is evidenced by the fact that in the battle of materiel during which men were massacred ruthlessly, they nevertheless succeeded in maintaining a gallant and fair attitude in man to man combat.--Pemsel.

experience and no technical knowledge. The division commander was regarded by all the parachute troops as an ignoramus. When a battalion commander of the 6th FS Regiment was ordered by LXXXIV Corps to take over for a short time a regiment of the 5th FS Division, whose previous commander had been killed at the front, he reported through channels to the Parachute Army that conditions in the command setup of the 5th FS Division were absolutely shocking.[11]

During the night of 12 July the engineer battalion of the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division surrendered Tribehou on the right wing of the 2d SS Panzer Division, and a gap of about two kilometers developed on the right, following which the Gebhardt Kampfgruppe of the Panzer Lehr Division went into position at Le Hommet. During the night of 12 July the 3d Battalion of the 13th FS Regiment of the 5th FS Division was placed in this gap. On 13 July Le Hommet was lost and American tanks, pushing ahead toward the west, advanced on Les Champs de Losque. On 13 and 14 July fluctuating battles took place around this locality, during which the above-mentioned parachute battalion was completely annihilated. On 14 July additional elements of the 5th FS Division were inserted.

The German forces, up to and including the regimental commander, and probably even up to division level, were in general kept far too much in the dark concerning the situation of adjacent units. For information regarding the overall situation on the Normandy front they had to depend on reports made by the Allied radio station "Calais," (which frequently broadcast surprisingly accurate information and was listened to regularly by all staffs and probably by the troops as well), on the Allied "Troop Information" propaganda sheets, and on rumors. The 6th FS Regiment frequently detached officer reconnaissance patrols to adjacent sectors in order to keep informed about the situation there.

---

[11] The Seventh Army was aware of the extremely low combat efficiency of the 5th FS Division. Owing to its poor composition, the operations staff of the division was committed at the front by the army for only a very short period if at all. The army's plan to withdraw the regiments of the 5th FS Division from the front after the first failures was not carried out, because no replacements of any kind were available. This was particularly unfortunate because of the decisive importance of this front.--Pemsel.

III. WITHDRAWAL FROM THE PERIERS AREA

A few days after the defensive victory of the 6th FS Regiment in the Seves sector strong American bomber formations, totaling about two thousand planes, attacked about noon the area on the right of the 2d SS Panzer Division and west of St. Lo. This raid lasted almost two hours, including the approach formation and the return flight, the latter over the sector of the 6th FS Regiment. It provided an enormously impressive picture.[12]

One or two hours later the commander of the 6th FS Regiment inquired by telephone how this bombing attack, the heaviest thus far, had affected the 2d SS Panzer Division. The reply was completely reassuring. He was informed that the forces in the forward line had been struck only lightly by the area bombing, which had been concentrated on the rear area, occupied quite sparsely by combat trains; only a few artillery positions had been hit, though telephone communications had been disrupted to a considerable degree.

The commander of the 6th FS Regiment was all the more surprised when, on the afternoon of the same or the next day, the regimental adjutant was summoned to the division where he was given the following instructions and orientation concerning the situation: "The Americans have effected a breakthrough in the sectors of the 5th FS Division and the Panzer Lehr Division. The front has collapsed in these sectors. American tanks have crossed the Periers-St. Lo road and, advancing via Marigny, are approaching the St. Lo-Coutances road. The 2d SS Panzer Division will accordingly fall back this very night to a reconnoitered position south of Periers, near St. Sauveur-Lendelin. The 6th FS Regiment will be committed at the northern edge and west of St. Sauveur-Lendelin, with its greatest strength along the Periers-Coutances road."

The withdrawal of the regiment to St. Sauveur-Lendelin was affected without enemy interference. The 16th Company, which had in the meantime been brought up to a strength of one hundred men by new replacements and men taken from other battalions, was instructed by the regiment to occupy the positions in the Seves sector. It was to feign greater than actual strength and to fall back southward to the new positions of the regiment only after enemy pressure, while constantly maintaining contact with the enemy.

---

[12] This air attack was concentrated on the sector of the 14th FS Regiment.

On the morning following this night withdrawal from the area of Periers the commander of the 2d SS Panzer Division (the former commander of the regiment who, a few days previously, after the division commander had been wounded, had assumed command of the division) arrived at the 6th FS Regiment's command post and informed the regimental commander that it had not yet been possible to check the breakthrough of American tanks and that the new position of the 2d SS Panzer Division had already been outflanked by American armored forces advancing from the east. He stated that if the division did not wish to be encircled then and there it would have to withdraw immediately to the area of Coutances. Sobbing, the SS commander concluded by saying: "I am an old tank fighter. This breakthrough has decided the issue. We have lost the war in France."

That these developments came as a surprise not only to the 2d SS Panzer Division but also to the divisions on its left was demonstrated by the fact that the commander of the 6th FS Regiment, while trying to locate a proper site for a regimental command post in the vicinity of St. Sauveur-Lendelin, came across the troops of the supply section of an infantry division, who were living in a chateau under real peacetime conditions, lolling in bed, and wearing pajamas. This was also evidenced by the fact that neither the supply officer nor the operations section of this division, when informed by telephone, gave credence to the regimental commander's statements concerning the German withdrawal.

The commander of the 6th FS Regiment decided not to carry out the order of the 2d SS Panzer Division, which called for immediate withdrawal, while it was still daylight. He preferred to bring up the 16th Company, which he knew to be still in the Seves sector, to grant the exhausted troops some rest after the long night march and to avoid any unnecessary losses from strafing planes. He therefore ordered the troops to remain in the vicinity of St. Sauveur-Lendelin for the time being and he himself went ahead with only the absolutely necessary reconnaissance elements to the vicinity of Coutances in order to reconnoiter the new position in the Soulle sector extending from the bridge two kilometers north of Ouville to south of Courcy (the division sector ran from Cerisy to the eastern edge of Coutances). The 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division Kampfgruppe was to effect a junction with the 6th FS Regiment on its right and the motorized infantry regiments of the 2d SS Panzer Division on the left.

## IV. THE COUTANCES POCKET

After another night march the 6th FS Regiment occupied at dawn the positions which had been hastily reconnoitered by the regimental commander. Since the enemy situation was obscure, strong reconnaissance

forces were committed at daybreak. By noon they made a report approximately as follows: Along the Periers-Coutances road the Americans appear to be pursuing the withdrawing German troops only very cautiously and in small numbers. On the other hand, American tanks advancing from the St. Lo area have apparently pushed far to the south; we must expect an armored attack along the St. Lo-Coutances road and south of it.

As a result of these reconnaissance operations the regimental commander decided to have each of his two battalions pivot at a 90-degree angle on their own right flanks, so that these battalions, which had originally been committed side by side, with the front facing northward, would now be echeloned, one behind the other, with their fronts facing east. The left flank of the former left battalion was now along the St. Lo-Coutances road.

Elements of the regiment of the 2d SS Panzer Division were inserted between the two parachute battalions with their front facing northward; at the St. Lo-Coutances road the majority of the armored infantry units of the 2d SS Panzer Division joined the parachute battalion stationed on the left, producing a stairstep position. It was impossible to establish contact with the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division Kampfgruppe which was located somewhere to the right of the 6th FS Regiment.

Shortly after the two parachute battalions wheeled eastward they were engaged by the enemy. The St. Lo-Coutances road especially seems to have been the scene of heavy and costly fighting, during which the 11th Company of the regiment was completely annihilated. The morale of the parachute troops as well as that of the SS forces began to deteriorate. The SS troops blamed the parachute elements for not holding out longer, while the latter accused the SS of fighting to the last parachutist. One battalion commander of the 6th FS Regiment suffered a nervous breakdown.

Even more alarming than the dispatches from the front were the reports received at the regimental command post from the rear. The regimental paymaster reported that he had been cut off from the baggage train by enemy tanks; the regimental surgeon reported that he was no longer able to evacuate the wounded, because the division's main dressing station had been surrendered to American units.

The regimental commander now made plans for a speedy withdrawal, gave instructions to reconnoiter withdrawal routes, and sent his adjutant to the division command post with instructions to keep him informed about the situation. Toward evening it was reported that the commander of the 2d SS Panzer Division had been killed by tank fire in the immediate vicinity of the division command post.

After nightfall the adjutant returned to the front with an order from corps, entitled "Order Concerning the Perimeter Defense of the LXXXIV Corps."

The order specified that the regiment should shift its position a few kilometers to the right, an arrangement which, in view of the situation and the fact that the night was unusually dark, was not exactly welcomed by the regiment.

The new position was to be set up in a semicircle around the town of Ouville about two kilometers from its outskirts.

The regimental commander immediately set about reconnoitering the newly assigned position, as far as such reconnaissance was possible in the darkness, and while still in the field, he transmitted to the advance parties of the battalions which had accompanied him, the order concerning the movement planned by the corps.

About 0100, when the regimental commander returned to the regimental command post, he was informed that an urgent radio message had been received from the division which it was not possible for the regiment to decode because the division had used the code from the day before and the regiment's decoding charts had been burned at midnight in accordance with instructions. It was not until 0300 that the regimental commander obtained the clear text of this radio message, which read approximately as follows: "The 2d SS Panzer Regiment and the 6th FS Regiment, beginning immediately, will, under cover of darkness, effect a breakthrough in the direction of Percy via St. Martin-de-Cenilly. After successfully accomplishing this mission, the 6th FS Regiment will assemble in the area of La Mancelliere and await instructions from the division."

It was no simple matter to collect the battalions, which by companies and platoons were now moving into the new position, and to assemble them at a rendezvous point where the forces were to mount the armored vehicles of the 2d SS Panzer Regiment. This regiment apparently experienced similar difficulties in trying to assemble its individual units into a march column. It was not until dawn, about 0600, that it was possible for the long column of SS tanks, on which the parachute forces rode, to begin moving on the assigned road. In all there may have been about two hundred armored vehicles of all kinds (including a number of assault guns of the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division Kampfgruppe and various Seventh Army battalions) and roughly 1,500 parachute troops. The commander of the 6th FS Regiment rode behind the advance armored element in an armored personnel carrier which had been assigned to him.

It was too late for a breakthrough "under cover of darkness," as ordered by the division. Fighting had to be done in daylight. At first the weather seemed to be favorable for this undertaking for during the early morning hours a light fog provided cover for the column against air observation.

About 0800 the fog lifted and the German armored column drove along in brilliant sunshine. All eyes nervously watched the cloudless sky; we all expected enemy strafing planes to attack at any moment. Throughout the previous days American strafing planes had supported the ground attack from early morning until late at night and had kept all march routes under surveillance, but this morning not a single American plane appeared in the sky.

About 0830 the German armored spearheads suddenly encountered at La Corbiniere an American antitank obstacle covered by either tanks or antitank guns. The armored elements halted; one or perhaps two German tanks were put out of action; the rest came to a sudden stop so that in the front third of the column the tanks were standing on the road one behind the other at intervals of barely five meters. The parachute troops jumped off the tanks, rushed forward, and gathered in the ditches on both sides of the road.

The enemy situation was completely obscure. There was firing from one or two antitank guns or tanks and a few machine guns.

Unfortunately, the German situation was also totally obscure. It became apparent immediately that the armored column had been cut in half in the morning fog and that the second half of the column of tanks on which the forces of the 3d Battalion of the FS Regiment were mounted had evidently lost its way.

The command status was equally confused. The commander of the armored regiment, an SS commander with a rank equivalent to major, refused to obey the commander of the 6th FS Regiment or even to accept his suggestions, although the commander of the 6th FS Regiment held the rank of lieutenant colonel. On the other hand, the SS commander himself was unable to come to any decision. His column of tanks, standing at close intervals, was helpless.

The 2d FS Battalion had in the meantime been deployed on both sides of the road and distributed over an area of perhaps five hundred meters in width. It was able to advance a few hundred meters in terrain which offered practically no cover, but was then brought to a stop by the fire of American machine guns and mortars.

In view of this situation, the commander of the 6th FS Regiment decided to have his 16th Company make a wide detour to the left around the antitank obstacle in order to either break up the obstacle in a flank attack or at least find a way to bypass it. Led by the regimental commander the company advanced single file to the vicinity of a village, probably Notre-Dame-le-Cenilly, without encountering enemy troops. In this village American trucks were being peacefully driven up, and in a period of about ten minutes an estimated two companies of infantry were unloaded. At the outskirts of the village the regimental commander believed he saw a well-camouflaged tank.

It would have been useless for the 16th Company to attack the village. The regimental commander and the company turned back and reached the command post by the route over which they had come.

Here the picture had not changed greatly. The American forces had noticeably increased in number; the parachute forces had not been able to advance a foot; and for the last two hours the SS tanks had been standing idle at close intervals on the road.

The regimental commander called on the SS commander, who informed him that one armored vehicle of his regiment, which had lost its way, had reported by radio at about 0900 that the road via St. Denis-le-Gast was still open and clear of enemy troops.

The commander of the 6th FS Regiment thereupon proposed to the SS commander that he withdraw from action and try to reach St. Denis-le-Gast by the quickest route possible, before this means of escape was also blocked and before the enemy air force could take a hand in the fighting. This was the first suggestion made by the regimental commander which was immediately accepted by the commander of the SS tanks. However, he did not comply with the request of the regimental commander that the SS tanks delay the evacuation until the parachute troops had had a chance to break off action with the enemy and remount their vehicles with some degree of order. On the contrary, he ordered immediate withdrawal.

The commander of the 2d SS Panzer Regiment was one of the first to leave the field of combat, to take his place behind the newly formed armored spearheads which headed the column of his regiment advancing via Roncey toward St. Denis-le-Gast.

The commander of the 6th FS Regiment was in an unfortunate situation. There was still no news whatever from his 3d Battalion; when the SS tanks drove off without taking along the elements of the 2d Battalion,

these had to try to reach the opening at St. Denis-le-Gast on foot. It was highly questionable whether the gap would still be open by the time they reached it.

The commander of the 6th FS Regiment therefore issued an order to cease fighting immediately and to break off contact with the enemy; all who could reach the SS tanks were to mount them, while the rest were to be collected by the commander of the 2d Battalion and under his command seek a way out of the pocket.

After he had transmitted the order to the commander of the 2d Battalion the regimental commander joined the tank column in order to take over, if necessary, the command of those portions of his regiment which had mounted the armored vehicles. The regiment was thus divided into three separate groups: the first group, led by the commander of the 3d Battalion, consisting of the troops which had mounted the SS armored vehicles which had lost their way in the morning; the second group, in charge of the regimental commander, composed of those troops which after the battle at the antitank obstacle at St. Martin-de-Cenilly had again reached the SS tanks and mounted them; and, finally, the third group consisting of those elements which had remained at the battlefield at St. Martin-de-Cenilly and had been placed in charge of the commander of the 2d Battalion.

Little is known concerning the fate of the first group. They apparently succeeded in escaping through the opening at St. Denis-le-Gast without encountering enemy troops. Just south of St. Denis-le-Gast however the column of tanks was apparently attacked by American strafing planes and in part annihilated and in part dispersed. The commander of the 3d Battalion, who had been leading this group, was killed during this air attack while seeking cover under a tank.

The column of tanks carrying the second group was attacked north of St. Denis-le-Gast by American strafing planes. The regimental commander rallied the parachute troops (to whom motorcycle messengers sent in advance had previously called out instructions that in case of an enemy attack they were to leave the attacked vehicles and withdraw to the left) and in a march covering more than sixty kilometers led them to the area of La Mancelliere, four kilometers southwest of Percy. No casualties were suffered during this movement.

By the time the third group reached St. Denis-le-Gast, it had already been occupied by the Americans. The commander of the 2d Battalion, who was in charge of this group, therefore waited until dark and then led his men out of the pocket past the American armored security elements without encountering any enemy troops.

A large number of stragglers from the Seventh Army units and members of the first group of the regimental troops made their way to the second and third groups.

## V. THE VILLEDIEU POCKET

Independently the regimental commander and the commander of the 2d Battalion each decided to grant their exhausted troops a day of rest and sleep after the withdrawal from the Coutances pocket. Consequently on the day following the withdrawal both groups of the regiment, although separated, were concealed even from other German troops in barns off the main march routes.

It was not until the next day that the regimental commander and the commander of the 2d Battalion made successful efforts to reestablish contact with the division. Through the division these two groups learned about each other's fate. Each of the two groups had considered the other lost. The regimental commander then reassembled the remnants of the regiment, approximately one battalion (not quite 1,000 men) in strength, and sent the commander of the 2d Battalion to the Parachute Army headquarters at Nancy where he was to make a verbal report concerning the fate of the regiment and explain why resistance in Normandy was doomed to failure. The commander of the 2d Battalion left the regiment on 1 August 1944.

It was evident to everyone that units which in the smaller area of the Cotentin Peninsula and with unimpaired fighting power had not been able to withstand the force of the American attack, would now, when they had been defeated and scattered, be less able than ever to check the advancing American armored formations. Officers and men therefore clung to the hope that there was truth in the rumor, which was circulating among the troops about 1 August, that the German High Command had decided to give up southern and western France, to withdraw the Seventh Army behind the Seine, and to establish a new defensive front on the Seine and the Yonne. The troops themselves no longer believed that they would be able to hold out in Normandy; however, during these first days in August they still felt strong enough to offer effective resistance behind a strong sector like the Seine-Yonne line if they were able to reach it in time. Only too soon it turned out that this rumor regarding a withdrawal behind the Seine and the Yonne was not based on fact. In France, too, it seemed to be the aim of the High Command to apply the tactics of

"holding at any cost" and allowing the units to be encircled. The troops had already become acquainted with this policy in Russia.[13]

It first appeared that an attempt was being made to form a defensive flank along a line extending from Percy to St. Denis-le-Gast to Avranches in order to prevent a widening of the American breakthrough.

In the sector extending from Percy to St. Denis-le-Gast, in which the 2d SS Panzer Division was committed, this defensive flank consisted of a thin line formed by infantry security detachments. Dispersed elements of the Army and the Navy and remnants of the 5th FS Division (the latter committed on both sides of the main road running almost due north and south from Hambye via Sourdeval to Villedieu and joining the St. Denis-le-Gast -Villedieu road north of Villedieu) had been inserted between the remnants of the two panzer grenadier regiments, the 2d SS Panzer Division regiments and the remnants of the 17th SS Panzer Grenadier Division Kampfgruppe. There was practically no artillery remaining in the 2d SS Panzer Division sector; the 2d SS Panzer Artillery Regiment still had seven guns. The 2d SS Panzer Regiment probably still retained about one fifth of its original strength or one battalion.

On the afternoon of the second day after the escape from the Coutances pocket, almost exactly forty-eight hours after he had passed St. Denis-le-Gast, the commander of the 6th FS Regiment, who was on the way back from the division to his unit, crossed the road running from Hambye via Sourdeval to Villedieu, on which he had in the morning seen elements of the 5th FS Division. On this road he now observed the first American tanks rolling southward in the direction of Villedieu with no German resistance in sight. Although the commander succeeded in crossing the road, the rest of the regiment and the SS forces committed east of the road were cut off by this American armored thrust from the division command post located west of the road.

---

[13] I must agree with the author that after the American breakthrough at St. Lo, the only possible decision for the German top-level command was to make a timely withdrawal across the Seine. The practice of exposing whole armies to annihilation by having them remain too long in front of river barriers was to continue until the end of the war. This happened when, after heroic battles, Army Group Italy was given orders to hold out to the last man in front of the Po in spite of the hopelessness of the situation.--Pemsel.

In view of this situation the regimental commander decided to act on his own responsibility. The remaining elements of his regiment did not have a single antitank weapon at their disposal, not even Panzerfausts. It seemed useless to resist or even to remain. Consequently, after nightfall the commander of the 6th FS Regiment led the remnants of his regiment in a march covering a distance of more than fifty kilometers, bypassing Villedieu, to the area of St. Martin-le-Bouillant, south of Villedieu, which they reached about 0800.

The regimental assembly point for minor casualties at Alencon was designated by the commander as the collecting station for the dispersed elements of the 6th FS Regiment; messengers also guided to that point the regimental trains which, four days previously, had been assigned by the regimental commander to the area of Avranches where some of the elements had been employed by the garrison commander in a futile and brief battle against the American armored columns which had broken through. At St. Martin-le-Bouillant the regimental commander found the command post of the 353d Grenadier Division. The remnants of this division had been combined into two combat groups and placed on the heights west of St. Martin-le-Bouillant with the front facing westward. This force was to provide protection against the American armored units which had broken through and were advancing on Avranches and to narrow down the enemy breakthrough. The regimental commander placed the remaining portions of his 6th FS Regiment under the 353d Grenadier Division.

On the same afternoon American tanks, which had probably advanced from the north, pushed forward up to the northern edge of St. Martin-le-Bouillant. This thrust again divided the remnants of the 6th FS Regiment into two groups; a smaller group of approximately company strength, which remained with the regimental commander and a stronger group which, after contact with the regimental commander was disrupted, fought its way through to Alencon.

The regimental commander and the company, which remained with him, fought as a reserve of the 353d Division south of Saint Sever-Calvados and south of Vire; these engagements were in general of no consequence. The company which was stationed in the vicinity of the division command post was, as a rule, alerted around noon and sent forward in order to seal off any breakthrough in the division sector. These sealing off operations were invariably successful because in the area south of Saint Sever-Calvados and south of Vire the American infantry was feeling its way forward only gradually and very cautiously. In the evening the division was as a rule instructed to change positions, the order usually specifying that the front be withdrawn a few kilometers.

## VI. WITHDRAWAL FROM NORMANDY

About 10 August the regimental commander received an order from the Parachute Army instructing him to withdraw the remnants of the regiment from the front and to lead them back to the Nancy area. However it was several days before Seventh Army released the sixty men who were still with the regimental commander.

By 14 August the regimental commander and the sixty men with him advanced via Tinchebray and were able to reach the Dreux Air Base, to which point the regimental commander also sent the elements of the regiment which had in the meantime been assembled at Alencon. They still totaled 1,007 men, although they lacked heavy weapons, were inadequately equipped, and were clothed in tatters. After a few days of rest at Dreux, which the German administrative agencies already seemed to have abandoned, the regiment was transported in motor vehicles to Nancy, advancing via Paris (where utter confusion seemed to prevail among the German agencies, particularly those of the Air Force), Saint-Dizier, and Toul. Not the slightest sign of any activity on the part of the French resistance movement was observed between Tinchebray and Nancy by either the regimental commander who from Tinchebray on was riding in an armored car about six hours ahead of the regiment, or by the main body. As had been the case in Normandy, the French civilians along the entire route proved to be friendly and helpful when they were treated with kindness.

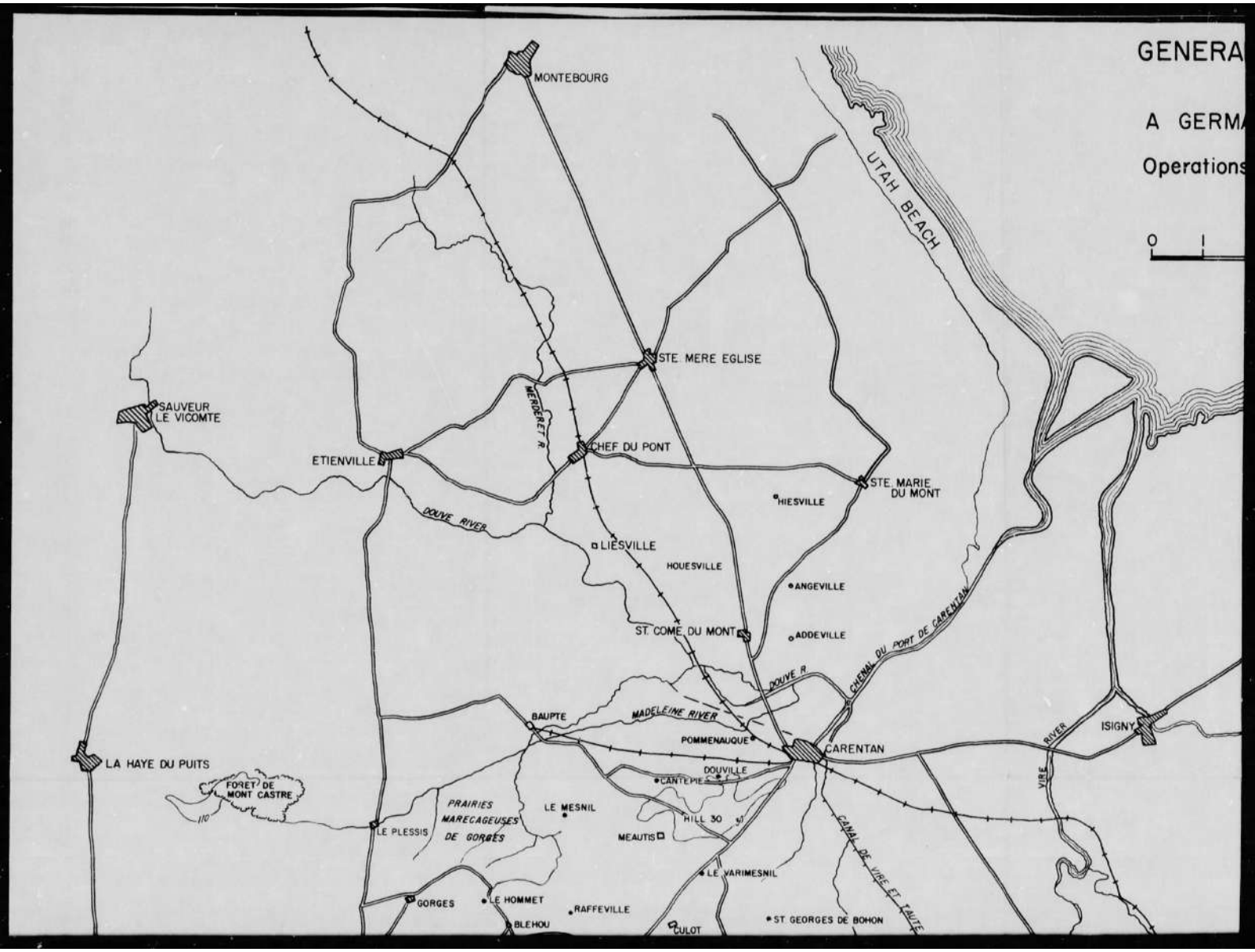
The regimental commander had not reported to his superiors the establishment of the assembly point at Alencon for minor casualties and stragglers of the regiment. Instead, the men assembled there were first reported as casualties according to regulations, being listed as either wounded or ill; or, in the case of men who had become separated, as missing. There was great danger that the higher Army authorities would learn of this secret assembling of the men by the regiment and that those who had been collected at Alencon would again be sent to the front and thrown into a battle which had become meaningless. Consequently, the regimental commander and his men felt relieved when on 20 August all the elements of the regiment which had escaped from the battle in Normandy were assembled at Nancy and received orders transferring it to Guestrow, Mecklenburg, where it was to be rehabilitated.

In order to depict the conditions prevailing in France behind the disintegrating German front in the middle of August 1944, it should be noted that the regiment on its own initiative took steps to begin its rehabilitation while it was still in France during the march to Nancy. The units were brought up to strength because a number of stragglers from the Army, the Waffen-SS, and other parachute

regiments reported to the advance message centers of the regiment, which had been set up along the march route, and requested to be taken into the regiment. They were taken into the regiment and clothing procured for them from supplies which were found at Dreux. Among other items, the regiment succeeded in purchasing on the French black market in Paris practically all the equipment needed to bring the regiment up to war strength.[14]

---

[14]The regimental commander's decision to assemble the regiment secretly at Alencon, located far to the rear, and to submit inaccurate reports to his superiors is not commendable. The regimental commander was still in command of sixty men and, as a result of his orders, found more than one thousand "stragglers" belonging to his regiment when he arrived at Alencon. None of the divisions which were being drained of their last resources at the front had such numbers at their disposal at this time. It is furthermore incomprehensible that the regimental commander incorporated in his regiment "stragglers" who naturally had been attracted by the news that the regiment was to be transferred to the zone of interior, instead of turning them over, in accordance with regular procedures, to the collecting points for stragglers. A curious feature is that the regimental commander equipped his forces by making large-scale purchases on the French black market.--Pemsel.

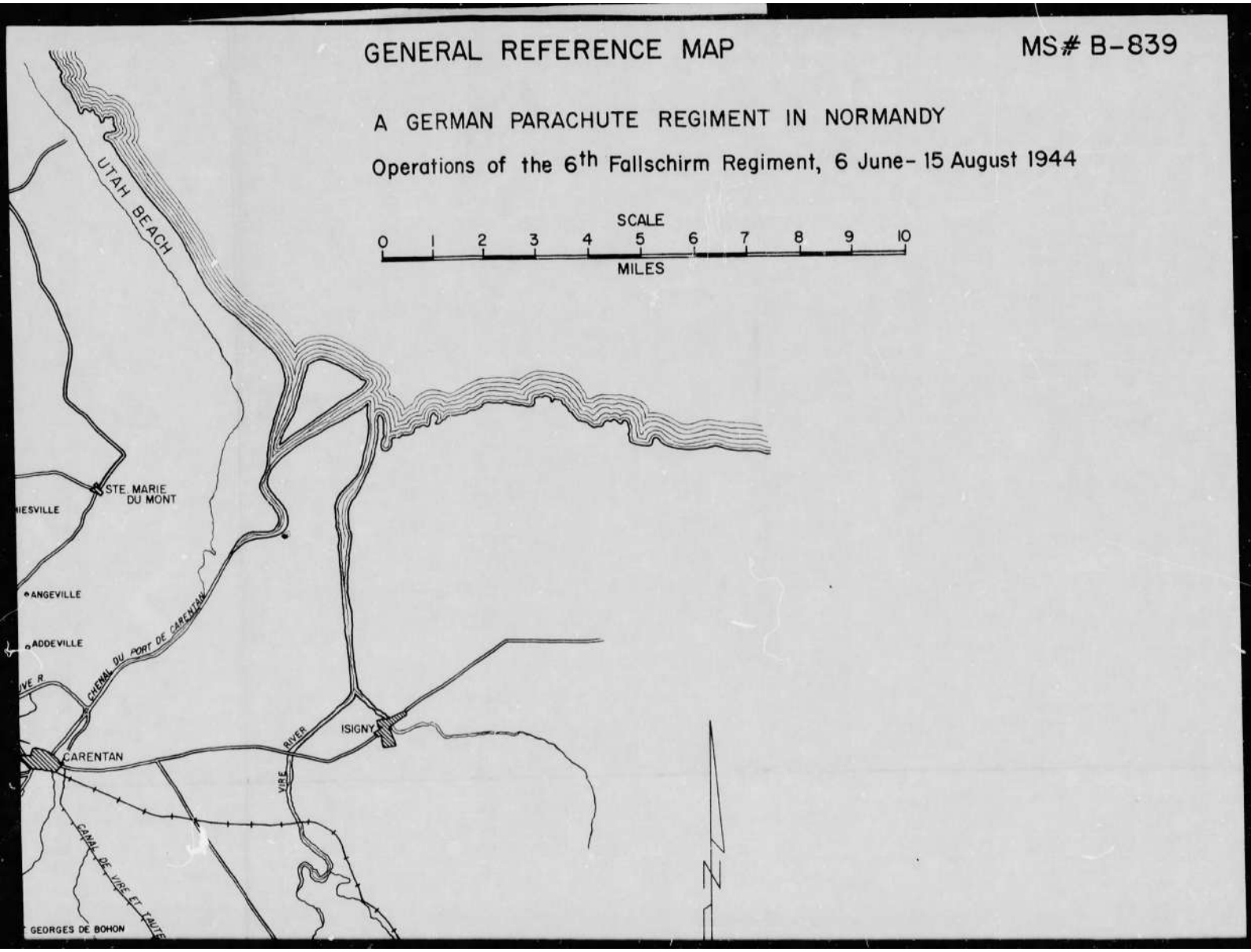

GENERA
A GERM
Operations
0
UTAH BEACH
MONTEBOURG
STE. MERE EGLISE
SAUVEUR LE VICOMTE
ETIENVILLE
CHEF DU PONT
MERDERET R.
STE. MARIE DU MONT
HIESVILLE
DOUVE RIVER
LIESVILLE
HOUESVILLE
ANGEVILLE
ST. COME DU MONT
ADDEVILLE
CHENAL DU PORT DE CARENTAN
DOUVE R.
BAUPTE
MADELEINE RIVER
POMMENAUQUE
CARENTAN
ISIGNY
VIRE RIVER
LA HAYE DU PUITS
DOUVILLE
CANTEPIE
FORET DE MONT CASTRE
PRAIRIES MARECAGEUSES DE GORGES
LE MESNIL
HILL 30
LE PLESSIS
MEAUTIS
CANAL DE VIRE ET TAUTE
LE VARIMESNIL
GORGES
LE HOMMET
RAFFEVILLE
BLEHOU
CULOT
ST GEORGES DE BOHON

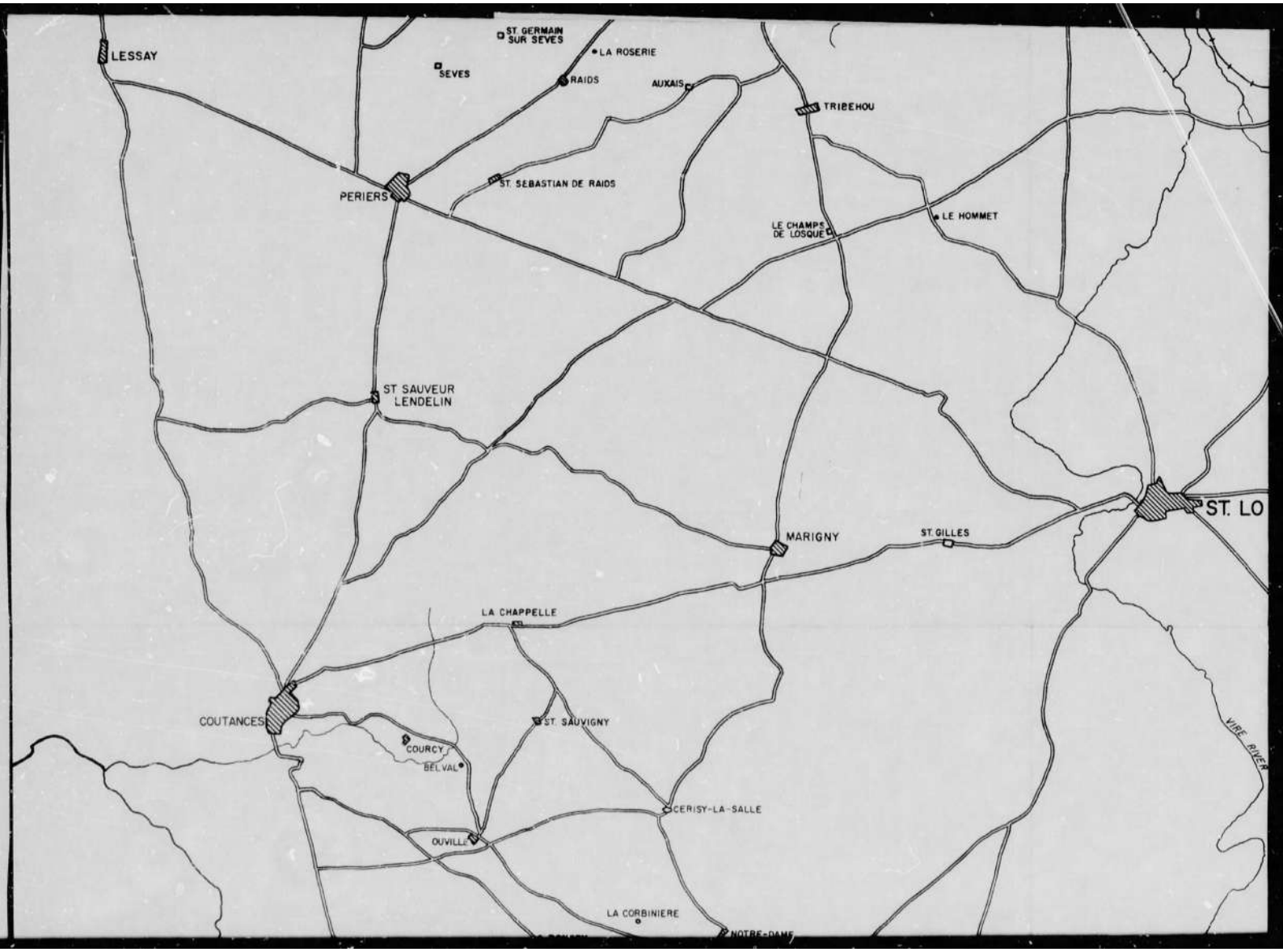
# GENERAL REFERENCE MAP

MS# B-839

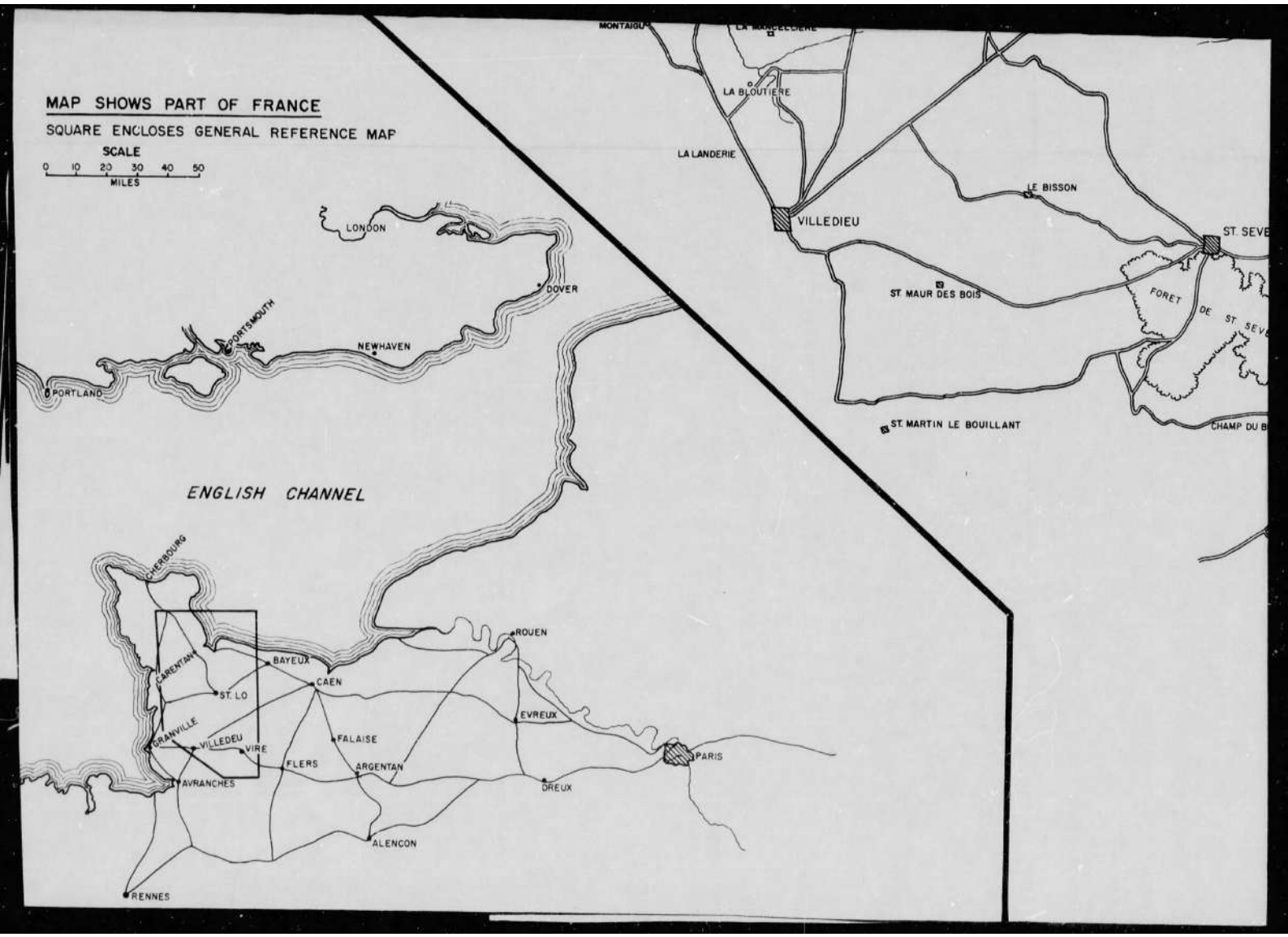
A GERMAN PARACHUTE REGIMENT IN NORMANDY

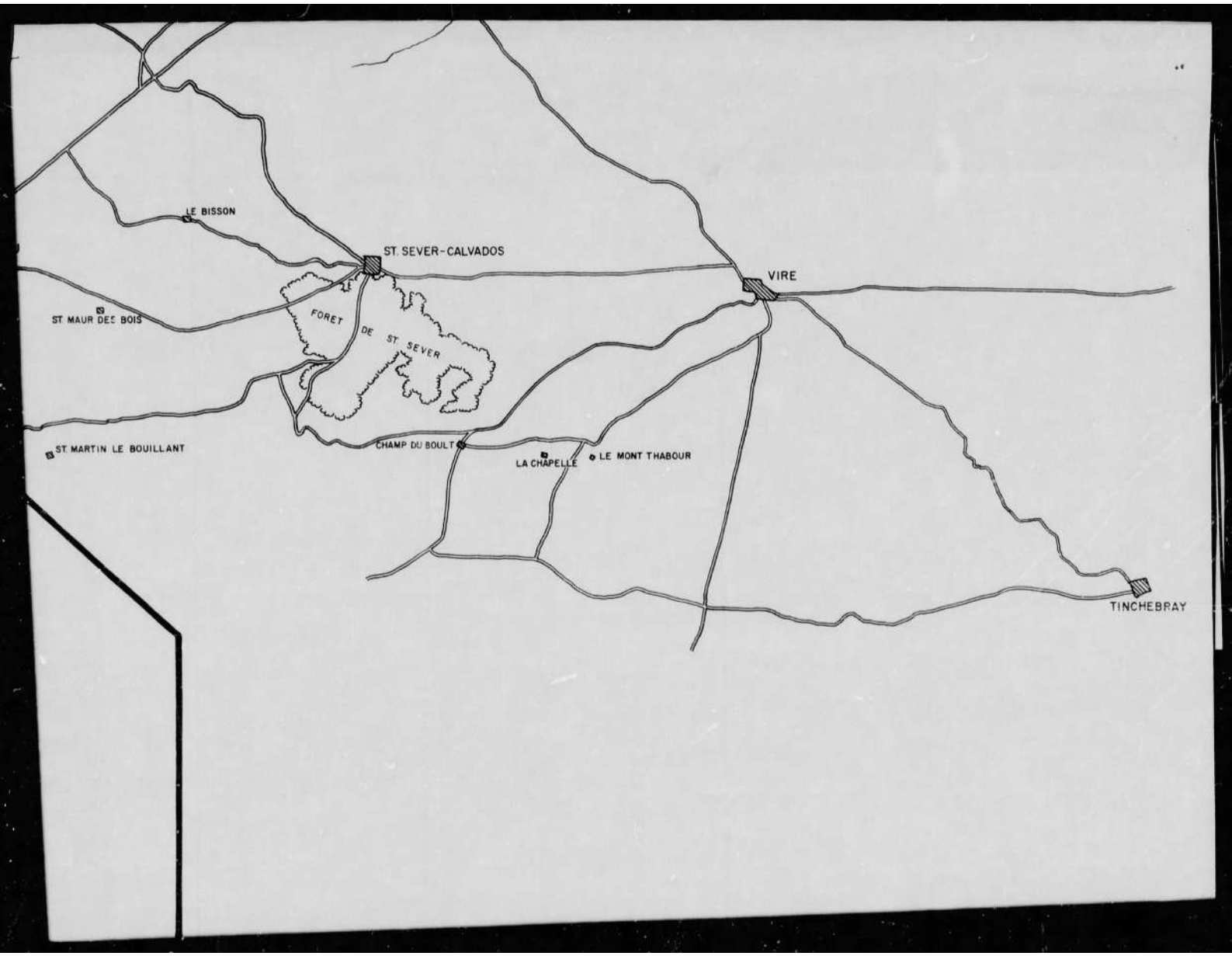
Operations of the 6th Fallschirm Regiment, 6 June- 15 August 1944




LESSAY
ST. GERMAIN SUR SEVES
SEVES
LA ROSERIE
RAIDS
AUXAIS
TRIBEHOU
PERIERS
ST. SEBASTIAN DE RAIDS
LE CHAMPS DE LOSQUE
LE HOMMET
ST SAUVEUR LENDELIN
ST. LO
MARIGNY
ST. GILLES
LA CHAPPELLE
COUTANCES
ST. SAUVIGNY
COURCY
BELVAL
CERISY-LA-SALLE
OUVILLE
LA CORBINIERE
VIRE RIVER

TRIBEHOU
LE HOMMET
ST. LO
ST. GILLES
VIRE RIVER
TORIGNY
SUR VIRE


MAP SHOWS PART OF FRANCE
SQUARE ENCLOSES GENERAL REFERENCE MAP
SCALE
0 10 20 30 40 50
MILES
LONDON
DOVER
PORTSMOUTH
NEWHAVEN
PORTLAND
ENGLISH CHANNEL
CHERBOURG
CARENTAN
BAYEUX
CAEN
ST. LO
GRANVILLE
VILLEDEU
VIRE
FALAISE
FLERS
ARGENTAN
AVRANCHES
ROUEN
EVREUX
PARIS
DREUX
ALENCON
RENNES
MONTAIGU
LA BLOUTIERE
LA LANDERIE
VILLEDIEU
LE BISSON
ST. MAUR DES BOIS
ST. MARTIN LE BOUILLANT
FORET


LE BISSON
ST. SEVER-CALVADOS
VIRE
ST MAUR DES BOIS
FORET DE ST SEVER
ST MARTIN LE BOUILLANT
CHAMP DU BOULT
LA CHAPELLE
LE MONT THABOUR
TINCHEBRAY